掟上今日子の色見本

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

講談社

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Kodansha

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The Color Sample of Kyoko Okitegami

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Translation: waifutime

[redacted]

序章　黒の誘拐犯

[redacted]

Introduction: The Black Kidnapper

Today, Ms. Kyoko was coordinated in a striped cut-and-sew top with a black summer jacket and matching tapered pants. A thick-soled wedge heel boot completed her look. The forgetful detective, whose memory resets with each sleep, has never been seen wearing the same clothes on different days—an eyebrow-raising rumor that now seems indeed true. After half a year of meticulously observing the movements of Kyoko Okitegami, the office director of the Okitegami Detective Agency, I've concluded this much anew.

Of course, I haven't been shadowing Ms. Kyoko for half a year just to check on her fashion choices—that would make me no better than some sketchy stalker. And yet, it's not as though I have some lofty, cultured reason for following this famously silver-haired detective. In a way, my motives might be less noble than those of a stalker's.

For I am biding my time to abduct the master detective—I reflect on the enormity of this task.

If planning a crime can be called work.

She is, by premise, a detective bound by absolute confidentiality—her memory resets with each sleep, which is to say, daily. Thus, she could handle any case involving privacy or sensitive information without risk of leaking it. Inevitably, personal details about Ms. Kyoko also remain utterly secure.

For now, while she is in the office, she is untouchable. Not a finger can I lay on her. That building—Okitegami Building, her property—boasts the fortitude of a fortress. Even if Japan were razed to the ground by a devastating airstrike, the Okitegami Building would likely retain its original form.

But during work it’s even worse. It's impossible to tell from the outside what kind of clients she serves or what kinds of requests she's fulfilling—given her profession's nature, the forgetful detective often receives covert requests from police stations too. The last thing I want is to swoop in only to find out that the person standing next to me is the police commissioner.

So, I must target her private time.

And target I shall.

First, I must discern whether she's off duty when she elegantly strolls through town, but this distinction was surprisingly easy—the presence of a handbag signifies her off time. It seems Ms. Kyoko adheres to the principle of approaching cases empty-handed—though there are times she's off duty without a bag, she never brings one to a crime scene as a rule. Incidentally, the handbag seems to be a part of her fashion, different with each occasion.

A total coordination.

Even that alone confirms she belongs to the high class, wealthy enough to stand out—it's a wonder she hasn't been kidnapped yet. Before someone else snatches her, I must do it. But is it easy to abduct her on her day off? Frustratingly, it's not that simple. Even on her days off, she seemingly retains the title of detective, never neglecting her surroundings.

I am a professional at tailing, after all. There's always the risk of being spotted—a risk inherent in following a young woman, which is, needless to say, a crime in this country. But the risk is worth the reward. For Ms. Kyoko. For the forgetful detective. For Kyoko Okitegami.

Certainly, it might be thought that a slender woman could be easily overpowered and abducted by force, but as I've said time and again, the opponent is a detective. One can never be too sure what kind of self-defense techniques she has mastered. What was the martial arts Sherlock Holmes knew, "Baritsu"? With roughly a month's worth of investigation, I might be able to predict her (infinite) wardrobe rotation, but that doesn't mean I've come to know everything about her. While she may prioritize fashion, it's unlikely she dresses with functional armament in mind, but then again, it wouldn't be too surprising what kind of secret weapons a detective might possess.

I dislike violence, to begin with. I prefer to conduct myself in the manner of a gentleman of old.

One must use their head. This is a battle of wits between the detective and the kidnapper.

By the way, giving it a title like "Ms. Kyoko Observation Diary" might make it sound more perverse, but when off-duty, she is approached by members of the opposite sex quite frequently—bluntly speaking, she gets hit on incessantly just by walking around town (curiously enough, from a distance observation, she doesn't seem to get hit on during work. Maybe it's obvious up close that her demeanor is distinctly different, even without needing to distinguish by her handbag. There's still so much I don't understand). If I had the same confidence in my charm as those bold challengers, I might have considered blending in with them covertly, but unfortunately, I tend to be cautious. In life, as well as in crime.

Therefore, instead of initiating contact myself, I decided to have Ms. Kyoko approach me—a more difficult approach? Not necessarily.

If certain conditions are met.

What was needed was a car. And not just any car, but a ridiculously expensive one at that.

One might say that preparing a luxury car to invite a lady to dinner would be exposing one's superficiality, but what I prepared was not what is typically considered a luxury car—it was a vintage, a classic car.

A car so old that it didn't even come with standard seatbelts, that it required daily repairs to function, and yet, one that had a price tag that would make your eyes pop out—it was a car released over fifty years ago. Naturally, it was a manual transmission, and I had to get the restriction lifted from my driver's license just to purchase it.

The expenses just keep piling up.

As long as I can recoup the costs. I must recoup them.

In essence, although it is an item of great value to those who recognize its worth, it is undeniably not, typically speaking, the kind of car that would captivate a woman's heart—it might even cool a century-old love.

But, even if Ms. Kyoko was unaware that this car was more than just a used vehicle, there are those who, upon seeing it, can't help but be drawn to it—and she is expected to be among them.

That's the plan, at least.

The reason being, there exists a mystery novelist by the name of Hirubei Sunaga, and one of the famous detectives he created used to drive this vintage car with panache—at least at that time. Now, just as ardent fans of Lupin III would be enchanted by a Benz SSK or a Fiat 500, readers of Hirubei Sunaga would not overlook this car.

This is a reversal of Ms. Kyoko's detective's attention to detail—her fondness for Hirubei Sunaga's works was an established fact as early as the third day of my tailing her. I shamelessly peered over her shoulder at the title and author of the book she was reading in a café—incidentally, due to being a "forgetful detective," Ms. Kyoko seems to reread the same book over and over. Unlike her fashion sense, which doesn't allow for wearing the same outfit twice, her reading material is in heavy rotation. She tends to move on to the next book once the current one is worn out from excessive reading.

When one finishes an interesting book, there's often a wish to "read it again, as if I know nothing about it!" Ms. Kyoko is literally practicing that—free from the so-called "nostalgia filter" that can make one think, "I thought this book was more interesting the first time around."

As a result, today I carefully timed my action and parked the aforementioned classic car on the street near the hotel where the detective in the black summer jacket was enjoying her afternoon tea. This, at the time, was an illegal parking move, but if I were to follow the rules and park in the hotel's underground parking lot, it would escape her notice. A spirit of lawfulness is commendable, but sticking solely to it won't facilitate a kidnapping.

Of course, there was a chance—probably around 90 percent—that Ms. Kyoko wouldn't notice the old car parked as part of the landscape near the hotel. Detectives aren't omnipotent beings.

Even if she did notice, it wasn't guaranteed she would care, thinking something along the lines of, "I like Mr. Sunaga, but I'm not particularly interested in the cars detectives drive." Preferences are highly diversified, even within detailed classifications. There's also a chance that I might have mistakenly bought the wrong model of car. There are many cars that look alike.

There's only one way to succeed, but failure routes are infinite.

If that's the case, then so be it. If it comes to it, I'll just use another method. I'll change my approach and keep challenging myself as many times as necessary. This old car strategy is not the first attempt to kidnap Ms. Kyoko—there have already been several plans made and attempted without success. I'd be disheartened if I looked back on how many I've tried. Instead of dwelling on such failures, I'd rather focus on the next plan, and the plan after that. It may mean continuing to incur unnecessary expenses, but if I eventually succeed in kidnapping Ms. Kyoko, the payoff would be more than sufficient—it would be considerable.

But the god of kidnapping smiled upon me. Not that I believe there is such a peculiar deity, nor would I want to be smiled upon by one.

In reality, the one who smiled at me was the white-haired famous detective, knocking on the window of the old car.

"Ah, excuse me! I'm sorry to be so forward, but that's a really lovely car! May I ride in the passenger seat?"

With high spirits and eyes shining, Ms. Kyoko clung to the window like a child, and I responded.

With pleasure.

第一話　赤の脅迫電話

Ch 1: The Red Telephone Threat

1

"Kyoko Okitegami is in our custody. If you want her back, prepare one billion yen."

When I, Mamoru Oyagiri, received such a one-sided threat through the receiver, spoken in the usual synthesized voice, I wasn't sure which was more shocking—the fact that Ms. Kyoko, my employer, had been abducted, or the staggering amount of the ransom demand.

Normally, one would be taken aback by the paradoxical development that a detective, who is supposed to investigate and solve cases, appeared to have been kidnapped. However, the one billion yen figure was not just overwhelming; it was enough to bring someone like me, an ordinary citizen, to a cognitive standstill.

During my momentary lapse into this state of shock, the call ended—there might have been some typical instructions like being called back at a calculated time, and of course, the warning not to contact the police, but none of that registered in my head. I was in a state of panic.

Let's organize the situation. Calm down. The case has just begun, but let's settle down as if it's already been resolved.

I am an employee of the Okitegami's Detective Agency, and a security guard who lives and works at the iron-clad, formidable building known as Okitegami Building—originally a security guard at an art museum that Ms. Kyoko frequented, but various circumstances led to me being headhunted.

My job entails being the bodyguard for the forgetful detective. Although the security of this building is among the world's best in both hardware and software, Ms. Kyoko one day decided that the eyes of a living person were necessary.

Ms. Kyoko of days past.

Why I was chosen as those "living eyes," I honestly don't know, which makes this situation—where my charge seems to have been abducted—all the more disgraceful. It's embarrassingly shameful. But, at this moment, my honor doesn't matter.

I don't care about losing my job now. Ms. Kyoko, who appears gentle but is actually quite a tyrannical boss, has fired me more times than I care to count. It's ridiculous even to consider.

Think coolly. It could be a prank call. It's a possibility. The phone number for Okitegami's Detective Agency is public, and Ms. Kyoko's reputation is quite established in some circles. It

wouldn't be surprising if someone decided to have a go at her... but why prank an unknown employee like me?

Anyway, should I call 110, the police... or is that not allowed? I feel like I was told not to contact the police... but should I obediently comply with that demand?

Should I just sit by, not contact the police, and then prepare one billion yen?

Thinking about it, despite the emergency, I find myself getting excited—like a master detective with an insatiable enthusiasm for unraveling complex mysteries.

One billion yen.

I can't even guess how many digits that is off the top of my head... Does the person behind the threatening call think they've kidnapped a major league baseball player?

Also, there's a feeling of "what can I even do?"—I mean no offense, but I don't have the capacity to make such a payment. Given that I live and work here, I do not receive such a hefty salary from Ms. Kyoko. A significant amount is deducted for living expenses. The deductions are so questionable, it's dubious whether they're even legal.

But perhaps it's unavoidable. No, not the deductions.

From the criminal's perspective, maybe I'm the only one they could threaten at a time like this—I've never heard of the forgetful detective having any family or relatives, and if she did, it would somehow feel like a letdown.

I had never deeply considered it before, but the person closest to Ms. Kyoko was none other than myself—a bodyguard. Even if it was an off-duty incident, the fact that I couldn't guard her makes me question whether I'm even qualified to call myself a bodyguard or not.

But let's set aside the idea that it could be a prank call. Surely the criminal isn't expecting much from my personal bank account—of course, their target must be Ms. Kyoko's savings.

A detective who solves any case in a day.

The fastest and the forgetful detective.

Absolute confidentiality—clients who bring their cases to the Okitegami Detective Agency often have various unique circumstances, and as such, the fees tend to be higher. Moreover, Ms. Kyoko is not the kind of noble detective who says, "As long as the mystery is solved, I have no interest in money."

It may sound bad to say she's profiteering, but she's running quite a greedy business—as well-known as a detective as she is, she's equally famous as a cheapskate. She guards the secrets of her clients as closely as the money in her wallet.

It must have been her wallet that the kidnapper had his eye on—certainly not the bodyguard's.

But still, one billion yen? One billion yen? Does Ms. Kyoko, as much of a cheapskate and slave to money as she is, even have such savings? If by some chance—one in a billion—she does, where on earth could it be?

2

From what I've heard and half-remember, kidnapping for profit is said to be a crime with a very high rate of failure. The success rate of violent crimes, in general, seems to crawl on the ground as it is, but among them, for-profit kidnapping apparently has almost no successful cases.

If I, a bodyguard and not a detective, may shamelessly share my amateur thoughts, one major hiccup seems to be that, at the time of the ransom handover, the criminal must reveal themselves—given the nature of the crime, it can't just be settled by a transfer, and physical contact for a cash payment is required, which is where they usually get caught.

But the terms of success and failure are from the criminal's point of view. Speaking from the victim's side—since I'm currently in such a situation—someone being taken hostage is already a severe blow. Or more than a severe blow, it's a deep gash. For the kidnapper, failure means "not receiving the ransom" and "getting caught," but on this point, an agreement can't be formed with the victim's desires. What the victim wants first and foremost is "the safe release of the hostage."

Even if the criminal is caught, if the hostage is killed, you can't exactly say you've overcome a sudden crisis in life. The idea that being in a bind is an opportunity is absurd.

The mindset of investigative units dealing with kidnapping cases might be different—they say there's a strategy to plan as if the hostage or prisoner is "dead" once captured—but if we dig deeper into the issue, is it really true that kidnapping for profit is a high-failure crime?

It's a common statistical trick, but when it comes to kidnappings, even if there are successful cases, the public wouldn't know about them.

Successful cases don't make it into the statistical data.

They end up as a bunch of nothings because they're settled quietly.

If a deal is struck between the victim and the criminal, it won't come to light—if the person is returned, then the pursuit of the criminal might be publicized afterward, as there's no longer a risk of the hostage being harmed. But would they really?

As in, by then, the criminal would have taken the money and fled far away... Well, considering there are victims who feel dishonored or humiliated having been kidnapped and paying the ransom as demanded, who then keep silent, it's difficult to simply talk about the success or failure of the matter.

Even if we win the war, whether or not that serves as consolation for those who died in battle—it's that sort of discussion.

In the first place, speaking about probabilities here is not so much impossible as it is utterly meaningless. After all, Ms. Kyoko isn't Schrödinger's cat; discussing how many percent she is likely to be saved or not seems entirely fruitless.

We must save her, one hundred percent.

While I am merely an employee, not a parent or family, and it is a stretch to call me a friend, it's uncertain whether I should bear such responsibility. However, as for making arrangements to save Ms. Kyoko, who seems to have no relatives (it's not certain whether she is truly alone in the world, but at least I have never heard her talk about parents or siblings), I am, for now, the only one, as her bodyguard.

Responsibility aside, I feel guilt. After all, it was my job to protect the life of the Forgetful Detective—if I regret not being attached to her like a poltergeist, even on my days off, then I haven't regretted it enough.

Strictly speaking, I am a security guard stationed to protect the Okitegami Building rather than Ms. Kyoko herself. So incidents that occur outside the building are technically out of my jurisdiction, whether I'm on or off duty (it wouldn't make sense for a security guard, whose memory does not reset with each sleep, to be constantly attached to a Forgetful Detective who must strictly maintain confidentiality). But I cannot be as heartlessly indifferent as that makes it sound.

I was the one who received the threatening call—it was I who picked up the threatening call to the office phone inside the building. Therefore, I judge this matter to be within my purview.

I needed to organize the situation and wanted to calm my nerves, so I waited until sunset—at the same time, holding onto the hope that Ms. Kyoko might return unexpectedly. Unfortunately, that did not happen. There was not a single call—not a "I'm lost, please pick me up within thirty minutes" from Ms. Kyoko, nor another threatening call.

Are they wary of trace back? Due to the nature of the Forgetful Detective's office, there are no devices to probe clients' privacy, not even caller ID, let alone a trace back device. I wish they would call with peace of mind—but either way, it may be time to act on the assumption that this is no prank call.

However, I'm not a child who can only parrot what he's been taught—because I am often thought to be closely acquainted with the achievements of the Forgetful Detective, it's expected that I might have a reasonable grasp of the ABCs of investigation and search. Rather, I'm a child who has been kept away from class. As I touched on earlier, Ms. Kyoko's confidentiality is extremely strict, so I am basically kept out of the center of the cases.

Given the secretive nature of such cases, it's likely not the first or second time Ms. Kyoko herself has been called upon to solve a kidnapping case, but I have never been present at the scene—so I do not possess any special tricks or loopholes for such situations.

I consider the following two points very sensibly:

1. If I have to prepare a ransom, how should I procure it?

2. Even if told not to contact anyone, should I still seek help from the police?

Let's think about it in order. At least to keep up appearances, I should follow Ms. Kyoko's lead and drink some strong black coffee.

Of course, the amount of money I can prepare is about one ten-billionth of a billion yen—no, even one ten-billionth is an exaggeration, but no matter how much I leverage my social credit and pile up debts without thinking ahead, the limit is, well, one million yen (not to complain in this crucial moment, but I'm not a regular employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency. You could say I'm a non-regular staff member or a freelancer who even has trouble getting a credit card).

If I were to meekly comply with the kidnapper's demands and prepare the ransom, there would be no choice but to arrange it from Ms. Kyoko's own purse—well, given that she owns a building like this one, it's highly unlikely that she's poorer than I am. It's inconceivable that she's whittling away at herself to pay me my salary.

Rather, if she were to sell this Okitegami Building with all its accommodations, wouldn't it probably fetch around one billion yen?

However, as I am not even a full-time employee (persistent, aren't I?), it's not like I can just go ahead and sell off the building I'm tasked with guarding... Still, this office (which is also my residence, making it all the less sellable) backs Ms. Kyoko's personal assets.

Even if it's not one billion yen, the amount of money Ms. Kyoko, who works so vigorously, has saved up is probably more than one can imagine. A ransom of one billion yen is such an outlandish and absurd figure that it seems more like fantasy than a serious demand... It sounds like they've made the demand anticipating this very situation.

This leads me to think that the perpetrator must be well-acquainted with Ms. Kyoko. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare to kidnap a famous detective—whatever methods they used, it seems that they must have done a thorough background check.

Perhaps the fact that they called Ms. Kyoko's home, which doubles as her office and where she is thought to live alone, and the fact that they were aware of my presence, a nameless security guard...?

If they've pinned the role of gathering cash on me, marking me with a target, that's a chilling thought—imagine being unwittingly incorporated into a criminal plan.

But the kidnapper isn't without slip-ups. Not that this necessarily brings any relief, but they've misjudged me, the man.

No, this isn't to say I have an ironclad spirit that won't yield to threats; rather, the culprit probably assumes that since I live in the office, I must have some understanding of where and how Ms. Kyoko manages her assets—though I have no such knowledge.

My apologies.

As to which bank Ms. Kyoko's abundant (?) wealth is deposited in, I don't have the slightest—does she even deposit it in a bank? As a detective prone to forgetting, if she forgot which bank or account she used, that would be a problem—it's even dubious whether the Okitegami Detective Agency is properly registered as a corporation.

To my knowledge, Ms. Kyoko conducts all her business in cash, with transparent accounting... perhaps under-the-mattress savings?

But Ms. Kyoko's closet, which should be stuffed with clothes, is like a fashion museum.

So, maybe the cash is kept in a safe deposit box... but what if she forgets about it anyway? Entrusted to someone trustworthy (other than me)... no, no, the fundamentally forgetful detective trusts no one. Bodyguards, police, clients—she's thorough in that regard, to the point of being called distrustful.

That leaves the safest place for asset storage inside this very building. In terms of security, this real estate could store missiles without issue. It may not be under-the-mattress savings, but there are a few empty rooms... I lack the imagination to comprehend the size of one billion yen, but it surely wouldn't take up more space than the building itself.

The building is too expansive to search aimlessly—it's as if I'm expected to hunt for a one-billion-yen treasure? Am I sane to have to do this?

Putting aside the prospect of being sued by Ms. Kyoko for such unsanctioned antics... it's conceivable that traps have been set, just like in a treasure hunt.

For example, when I moved into this building, Ms. Kyoko said something like this to me.

"Please make yourself at home and live comfortably as if it were your own house. I'll leave the place in your care when I'm away, so feel free to use the shower or anything else. However, you must absolutely never enter my bedroom. If you do, I will kill you with a perfect crime."

...It's probably rare in the history of mystery to have a character receive a murder threat from a smiling detective, but the thought that a mechanical trap, such as arrows shooting out the moment a door is opened, might be set up makes it impossible to search or feel at ease in the expansive home.

How could I possibly feel at ease? It's a workplace where tension is always enforced... Hmm, I seem to have hit a dead end concerning financial strategies already.

It might still be safer to copy a ten thousand yen bill a hundred thousand times.

At times like this, if I were another famous detective, perhaps one of my well-to-do clients who have requested my services in the past would offer to provide temporary financial aid–a dream-like development. However, with this being the Forgetful Detective we're talking about, there's no such client list—even if she had a patron in her detective business, like Kosuke Kindaichi, I'm unable to make contact, cut off from the information.

Make contact... Speaking of which, I should soon decide whether or not to contact the police about task number two, putting aside the matter of the ransom for now.

When watching a kidnapping drama on TV or encountering actual news reports, from a third-party perspective, the situation clearly calls for police assistance—I understand that, there's no room for indecision. If left to an organized investigation, the likelihood of the hostage returning safely increases dramatically—but now that I'm actually involved, it's not so easy to proceed with logical action.

As a coward, I can't help but fear that going against the kidnapper's demands and bravely contacting the police could lead to the hostage being harmed, or worse, not returning at all. If I were to follow the kidnapper's instructions and things ended up at their worst, the blame would fall entirely on the villain. But if I, on my own judgment, opposed their demands, it could put Ms. Kyoko's life in danger—and that thought shakes me to the core, preventing me from mustering

the courage to act according to the manual. It doesn't feel right to trust the criminal more than myself.

I might not know the contact information of the wealthy clients (including whether they actually exist), but if it's a request from the police, I've taken over a few times before—perhaps, as a preliminary step before making a report, it might be worth consulting with such officers?

They might be willing to give personal advice... No, as organizers they are, and as people of common sense, even if I bring up the issue, they'll likely try to persuade me that it is best to leave everything to the police.

As someone indecisive and unable to make up my mind, that might seem like the best course of action, but it also feels somewhat uncomfortable to leave such an important decision to someone else.

Of course, the police won't be able to maintain the same level of absolute secrecy as the Forgetful Detective, but they will certainly conduct their investigation discreetly, and a media blackout agreement will most likely be put in place. However, there's no guarantee that the meticulous kidnapper hasn't stationed a lookout in this building—the kidnapper could be part of a group.

Is there no way to insert one more cushion of insurance into the steps...? I can't be too cautious of a well-prepared criminal. Because of my limited capabilities, I want to do everything that I can. It should be possible, as long as it's within my limited capabilities.

As I continued to rack my brain, I received an epiphany—that's right, if it's him.

Even if the kidnapper had done their homework diligently and thoroughly, there is an expert who has knowledge surpassing that concerning the Forgetful Detective—perhaps he could provide the advice to break through this deadlock.

Indeed, the expert of the Forgetful Detective, a regular visitor to this building more than any affluent class, so to speak, the most favored customer of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Yakusuke Kakushidate.

3

"Indeed, I understand now. If that's the case, it was precisely the right choice to seek advice from me, Mr. Oyagiri. Nobody knows Ms. Kyoko as thoroughly as I do."

Despite the irritating response, establishing contact with Mr. Kakushidate was straightforward—upon dialing his mobile phone from the office line, he leaped at the call after one ring, asking, "Hello, is this Ms. Kyoko?"

His eagerness was more akin to that of a stalker than a client... However, it could be said that this very eagerness facilitated the swift contact.

The reason lies in the personal list of potentially dangerous individuals that I maintain for the Okitegami Detective Agency, which includes his full name, address, and contact details—otherwise, client data would normally be discarded.

Due to the nature of the Forgetful Detective.

Although I'm seeking help, I must confess, I had suspected that he might be the kidnapper—based on the realism of his first words, it seemed that this suspicion could be nearly 99% dispelled, but after all, he is a young man whose adoration for Ms. Kyoko drove him to submit a resume to the Okitegami Detective Agency.

He got ordinarily declined...

Still, it is understandable that Mr. Kakushidate, who by nature is prone to wrongful accusations, would come to revere Ms. Kyoko, having been rescued by her from predicaments on numerous occasions... Although understandable, it's still a bit excessive if you reach the point of making a name for yourself as an "expert on the Forgetful Detective."

I wonder if he has found a new job yet?

Such worries also come to mind.

Nevertheless, as pitiable as it is, the fact remains that he is the only one I can rely on at the moment—if anyone has a grasp of Ms. Kyoko's hidden assets (?), it might be him.

"By the way, Mr. Oyagiri, this is the first time we're having a direct conversation like this, isn't it? I've heard that I'm indirectly indebted to you. Ms. Kyoko told me. Let's consider this the time for me to return that favor."

Despite his youth, he spoke with an oddly theatrical manner. I did have a recollection regarding the "indebted" part, but if I were to express my honest impression of our "direct conversation," had I known he was this kind of person, I might not have offered help—the suspicion of his being prone to wrongful accusations seems quite justified upon actual conversation. However, I refrain from showing any regret. I am an adult.

Moreover, in truth, what I really want is just a little push. Mr. Kakushidate, who is much more deeply involved with Ms. Kyoko than I am, would probably say, "What are you hesitating for, Mr. Oyagiri? I will assist in the investigation, so please contact the police right away."

That was the kind of advice I was looking for.

But contrary to expectations, he said this:

"Please do not contact the police under any circumstances."

Huh? What is this suspicious character saying?

"Then, pretending to comply, first prepare one billion yen."

I tense up, suspecting once again that he might be the culprit—his words, "pretending to comply," sound like something straight out of a con artist's playbook, akin to "pretend you're being fooled," a typical cliché.

Am I currently the victim of a theatrical scam... or does Mr. Kakushidate, with his overly deep love for the Forgetful Detective, hesitate even more than I do to report?

Yet, it seemed that Mr. Kakushidate was suggesting from a different angle that refraining from reporting was the right move.

"It's humiliating enough that a master detective has been kidnapped, but if it becomes known that she had to rely on the police for her escape, it would tarnish Ms. Kyoko's reputation as a detective. That's something we must avoid at all costs."

His love for detective work is so deep it's frightening. I sought advice from an unbelievable person. But once that idea is given, as a (non-regular) employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency, I can't help but consider it—what if Ms. Kyoko does return safely, but after spending all our money, the agency's management goes and collapse, leaving the master detective destitute.

Of course, that's not the worst-case scenario. The worst would be if Ms. Kyoko never returned—there's no dismissing the possibility that's already the case.

I hadn't thought that far ahead when the threatening call came. I should have said something like "Let me hear her voice," or something to that effect—acting according to the dramatic script isn't so easy.

When I voiced such dangerous fears,

"No, she'll be fine. More than fine, considering it's Ms. Kyoko, she might well be arguing with her kidnapper and escaping on her own. So, Mr. Oyagiri, what you need to do is buy time,"

came back a reply befitting a commentator dedicated to Ms. Kyoko—but what I wanted to come back was Ms. Kyoko, not those kind of creative pointers.

What tremendous trust.

As someone who is usually up close to Ms. Kyoko, not just in her professional life, I cannot express much agreement with that trust—leaving that aside, it seems prudent to keep Mr. Kakushidate oblivious of the fact that I live and work here.

I could be killed, not falsely accused.

However, even if told to buy time—the cost of buying time being one billion yen is outrageous.

"It's just a show of money that won't actually be paid. Besides, even if it's not one billion yen, in extreme terms, preparing about 100 million yen should be enough, I think. The other party surely doesn't expect to take such an exorbitant amount seriously—they must be planning to assert dominance by starting high and later settling for less."

He's familiar with the tactics of criminals. This is it, the embodiment of a predisposition for false accusations—though 100 million yen isn't cheap (it seems so when compared to one billion yen, which might just be the criminal's clever scheming), if you think of it as the price for a human life, it's cheap, not just for Ms. Kyoko.

Still, it's not like things will go smoothly to the point where I can shoulder 100 million yen—ultimately, I'll have no choice but to dip into Ms. Kyoko's savings without permission.

Given how particular the master detective is about money, the necessary expenses I use might later be added to my debt, but this is an emergency—should that happen, I'll have to ask Mr. Kakushidate for help again. Debt brings company (a co-signer?).

But that's all for later (the afterparty, or the aftermath)—for now, the issue is preparing as much ransom money as possible and finding where Ms. Kyoko's hidden assets (?) might be. That's where the conversation returns to.

With this in mind, Mr. Kakushidate, the forgetful detective enthusiast, might even know where Ms. Kyoko's safe is.

"No, no. Don't overestimate me. I definitely don't know that much. I do know that Ms. Kyoko always hides a ten-thousand-yen bill in her shoe, but not where she pools her wealth."

Just knowing she hides a ten-thousand-yen bill in her shoe is enough—it's sufficiently criminal, but knowing that, I wished he knew where all the assets were pooled this time.

Is it all over?

The only option might be to search every nook and cranny within the building—which, by the way, gives us another reason not to report it to the police. If we report now, Mr. Kakushidate might get arrested. Our company could lose a very important client.

"However, as an expert, I can give you hints. Ideally, I would rush over to Okitegami Building and help you search the house, but if you're worried that they're watching the building, I can only advise you from afar."

The words almost reached the tip of my tongue, to tell such a suspicious person that crossing the threshold of the house in the owner's absence would disqualify me as a bodyguard, but I held back—because, hints.

In this situation, with no leads, that was exactly what I had been craving—something I was desperately longing for.

The commentator Mr. Kakushidate, a frequent visitor to the building as a client, may have had some idea of where the assets were hidden... It made him seem all the more like the real criminal, but it's also possible that he had heard something from Ms. Kyoko before I was hired, before I was living there. Ms. Kyoko could make a slip of the tongue, too. She's surprisingly careless.

I wonder where it could be.

Maybe the bedroom I'm forbidden to enter?

"No, no! Please never sneak into the bedroom! You'll be killed!"

His panic was as if he had nearly been killed once before. His previous demeanor as a dignified commentator seemed like a lie.

"There's nothing in that bedroom, nothing at all. Especially not in the ceiling. It's better not to enter at all. I don't recommend it."

The way he spoke made me think there had to be something in the ceiling of the bedroom—perhaps a large sum of money hidden in the crawl space above? If she went to sleep every night looking up at it, it would completely change the image of the forgetful detective who resets her memory every time she sleeps.

In a way, it's exactly as one would expect.

"It's not gentlemanly to sneak into a woman's bedroom without permission, Mr. Oyagiri."

Although I felt a flash of irritation, as if I didn't want to be told that by him, I decided to accept it as the wisdom of those who had gone before me—after all, what he was saying was perfectly valid.

It is also misleading that the cash is hidden in a place where I've been told to 'never sneak in'. Quite fearless, you could say...

So, what does Mr. Kakushidate suspect?

"Unfortunately, I have no idea. Ms. Kyoko wouldn't leak information to someone of my level."

For some reason, he spoke those words with pride. And then he continued.

"However, she seems to be anticipating all sorts of trouble—if she were to fall victim to a crime, she would have laid the groundwork to ensure that you wouldn't be left stranded, Mr. Oyagiri."

Groundwork? Does that mean... in the event of an unexpected accident or falling into a criminal's scheme, losing her memory during an investigation, she would have left a backup record in direct writing on the skin of her left arm, like the usual?

"I am Kyoko Okitegami. A detective. White hair, glasses. Twenty-five years old.

Head of Okitegami Detective Agency.

My memory resets every day."

Indeed, there's a high possibility that she left a memo somewhere so as not to forget the hiding place of her assets. Should I be searching for that memo instead of the assets themselves?

"No, in this case, it's something more direct. Remember, Mr. Oyagiri. Ms. Kyoko must have left you a hint. Because she's a cheapskate, she's sure to have made preparations—a contingency fund for use in an emergency."

He said it conclusively. One might be tempted to admire the odd point that even if it's out of love, he calls her a cheapskate outright, but surely, whether it is kidnapping or not, a master detective who has to work on the side of crime must also look after his own defense.

Just like this sturdy building, and the fact that she has employed me, a living human being—if she hadn't anticipated such unforeseen circumstances, that would be the real oddity.

...Seems to be what Mr. Kakushidate means.

I wonder, though, Ms. Kyoko does have her absent-minded moments, and I can't shake the feeling that she might be surprisingly easily kidnapped—however, it would be wise to adhere to the opinion of the expert in this case.

Regardless of what kind of person he is, there is no doubt that he took my consultation seriously, despite the difficult situation I'm in. I can't take that for granted. "Thank you very much. When Ms. Kyoko returns safely, I will make sure to communicate your contributions," I said, bowing deeply towards the other end of the telephone.

"It's fine, you can forget about it,"

In acknowledgement, Mr. Kakushidate says something that sounds like straight out of a forgetful detective fan.

"Well then, I must return to the interrogation room soon, so I will take my leave now. Don’t worry about it, I'm used to this,"

It seemed that somehow I had ended up seeking help from a suspect who was in the midst of an interrogation at some police station—whether or not there were people watching the building, whether or not I let him cross the threshold, he wouldn't have been able to help with the house search in any case.

I hope that during Ms. Kyoko's absence, the specialist with a propensity for false charges can get the best detective that suits his needs... Despite having narrowly missed each other repeatedly, I finally had a chance to talk to him, but it looked like meeting him face to face would have to wait for another opportunity.

4

"Please make yourself at home and live comfortably as if it were your own house. I'll leave the place in your care when I'm away, so feel free to use the shower or anything else. However, you must absolutely never enter my bedroom. If you do, I will kill you with a perfect crime,"

In conclusion, Ms. Kyoko's threatening welcome was the keyword... It was a negligible concern if left unmentioned, but the fact that I recalled it immediately after suggests that it did stick in my mind to some extent.

A foreshadowing.

Among them, what felt out of place was the phrase, "I'll leave the place in your care when I'm away, so feel free to use the shower or anything else"—it could easily be overlooked or missed in passing, but on closer examination, the logic leaps a bit—"leaving the place in your care" and

"using the shower freely" are separate actions that don't inherently connect—unless they are connected?

Could it be that the treasure for emergency use is hidden in the shower room? It's an unusual idea; a place with a lot of moisture and high airtightness doesn't seem like a spot to hide something. However, once the idea takes hold, you could also say it to be a blind spot precisely because of that.

No sooner had I thought of it than I began to search—the feeling was akin to clutching at straws. The shower room—strictly speaking, the bathroom. There was a stylish bathtub installed, a particular quirk of Ms. Kyoko's—though I had permission to enter, as opposed to the bedroom, crawling around the bathroom in the absence of the homeowner felt like an act akin to that of a pervert, leaving me with no room to criticize Mr. Kakushidate or the kidnapper.

Hesitation and restraint here would not befit a detective—I thought, but all that effort was in vain, as I found nothing immediately.

The space, with its high airtightness, had almost no place to hide anything, so I rummaged through it as if doing a thorough cleaning—behind the ventilation fan, inside the drainage pipe—but to no avail other than leaving everything sparkling clean.

What's the point of cleaning now?

Once again, I found myself wracking my brains, forced to engage in the mental labor I'm not suited for—was I mistaken? Am I just trying to force meaning out of Ms. Kyoko's casual remarks? Am I exaggerating a minor detail into something more significant—no, wait, hold on.

If we're talking details, there's one more. One more foothold to be taken.

'The shower room—strictly speaking, the bathroom.'

Strictly speaking, it's a bathroom, but I wonder why Ms. Kyoko referred to it as "feel free to use the shower or anything else"? It would have been just as good to say "feel free to take a bath or anything else"... why did she highlight the shower? It might mean that it’s a waste for a big-bodied man like me to use the bathtub as the water would overflow—but, Ms. Kyoko is not stingy except when it comes to money, she is not the type to impose excessive restrictions on the use of water.

Then, it's not that I was not allowed to use the bathtub, but was there a need for me to focus on the shower here?

However, like the bathtub, the shower is something I usually use normally, and it’s not a particularly distinctive appliance. There's a lever for water pressure and a lever for temperature adjustment... I had hoped for a development like in a spy movie where a hidden safe would

appear from within the mirror based on the angles of these two levers, but unfortunately, the mirror was just a mirror.

It was futile. What a thing.

On such a day when every second is precious, I've wasted time... thinking about how the Forgetful Detective who solves every case in one day must always fight such pressure, I'm forcibly made to realize the greatness of my tyrannical employer.

I know I have to give things a spin, but there's a limit to how much I can rack my brains here—crouching on the tiles of the washing area, I despaired, then it hit me. Giving things a spin. This is just a figurative expression. I wasn't subtly hinted at by Ms. Kyoko, nor was I given a hint by Mr. Kakushidate—just words.

It's just a manner of speaking—I didn't necessarily come here to spin anything in particular.

So, it was just a coincidence. Or rather, a miracle.

The accumulation of futile efforts produces miracles. Indeed, sometimes what I thought was inefficient, Ms. Kyoko's exhaustive reasoning—the detective technique of doing everything that comes to mind at random—I came to know its effectiveness firsthand on my own body.

Specifically, while it seemed to be fixed in place, the shower as an appliance, without needing a system like a hidden safe as controlled by a lever, is designed to be disassembled—the showerhead.

A showerhead that comes off when spun.

Naturally, the inside is hollow—the theory that something might be hidden inside struck me the moment I realized it, and I was convinced that it was the correct answer.

However, contrary to my hurried feelings, there was still one more step to take before reaching the goal—precisely, two steps.

Even after removing the showerhead, the inside was empty—hollow. No matter how much I swung it around, nothing came out.

I felt not so much despair as embarrassment at having dashed off in the wrong direction this time, but Ms. Kyoko didn't just say "shower"—she said "feel free to use the shower or anything else."

By this point, it wasn't so much a thought-out action but almost a reflex.

I twisted the lever as I was—naturally, from the hose with the removed showerhead, water flowed out in a clump, not dispersed finely.

Since I did it without thinking, naturally, I got completely soaked while still in my clothes—a disaster that wouldn't be amiss to call foolish, but I didn't care at all.

Because of that water pressure, a rolled-up piece of paper was pushed out from the inside of the hose.

I found out later, but it seems that nowadays, stationery like waterproof paper that doesn't get soggy in water or waterproof pens whose ink doesn't run when submerged are commonly sold.

Certainly, the item had been planted inside the shower hose... In the usual state where the showerhead is hooked on its hook, following gravity, it would be concealed deep within the hanging hose, thus simply removing the showerhead wouldn't lead one to find this paper—it would be nearly impossible to find.

It's like a treasure that can only be found when using the shower with the showerhead removed—a sort of two-factor authentication. Of course, as mentioned earlier, the only thing that can be hidden in such a space is a piece of paper that has been rolled up and secured with a rubber band.

In other words, a three-tier authentication.

The word written on the waterproof paper with a waterproof pen was this—"HEAD".

"HEAD"?

It was in Ms. Kyoko's own handwriting. Having lived in the same building, I could recognize her writing—"head", is it another clue?

No, this is a red herring. A mislead—though it's a possibility that seems unlikely for someone like me, one can't say there's zero chance that a burglar, having coincidentally broken into the building, might coincidentally remove the showerhead and coincidentally examine the inside of the hose, and coincidentally turn on the tap.

Just as there are thieves who ransack the fridge first, there may be thieves who ransack the shower hose first-just as there are viewers who try to guess the culprit by watching the staff roll of a mystery drama, real-life quizzers must be wary of those who arrive at the answer without going through the puzzle-solving process.

Well, it might be Ms. Kyoko's own precaution due to her intuitive nature... But let's recall Ms. Kyoko's words once more.

"Please make yourself at home and live comfortably as if it were your own house. I'll leave the place in your care when I'm away, so feel free to use the shower or anything else. However, you must absolutely never enter my bedroom. If you do, I will kill you with a perfect crime,"

It seems that she said various things to naturally incorporate a section of the hint, but now it stands out that she specifically mentioned her own bedroom—I would never consider entering a woman's bedroom without permission, no matter the circumstances, I just wouldn't... But, it could be said to be the perfect hiding place for hidden assets (?), if indeed cash were stuffed in the ceiling, it would be more risky than fearless.

That's exactly where a thief would likely search first—but conversely, what Ms. Kyoko forbade with "never enter" was her own "bedroom."

She said to consider the rest of the house as "your own" and to "make yourself at home"—not "Ms. Kyoko's bedroom," but "my bedroom" is open for investigation.

In other words, "HEAD" is "BED."

It was a barely shifted, almost not even a "misprint" code—a mystery that would be considered unfair, and a "treasure map" that a clean freak treasure hunter would not acknowledge. But if one were to interpret it forcefully, what causes the initial letter to turn into a so-called "voiced consonant" could be the water droplets inside the shower hose—making "head" into "bed."

Wet as a drowned rat, I immediately returned to my room and started dismantling the built-in bed—this was purely a matter of brute force.

More of a rough technique than a show of strength.

With a heave-ho, I flipped the bed, along with the mattress—feeling like a gorilla, not thinking of the consequences or where I'd sleep that night. It's said that a safe exceeding a certain size has its weight as security, but I wondered if such a heavy and solid bed was really part of generous employee benefits for a live-in security guard.

If what appeared had been another empty cavity, my heart would have certainly been empty too, but what did appear were two attache cases—unlocked, and when opened, both were crammed with cash.

It wasn't one billion yen, but...

There seemed to be roughly two hundred million yen.

...If Ms. Kyoko was the type to hide cash in the ceiling and fall asleep while gazing at it, she would seem to have rather poor taste, I thought. However, was I, night after night, greedily sleeping atop such a large sum of money... What kind of security is that?

Well, one might anticipate a thief with the savvy to first check inside the shower hose, but a thief with the good sense to search under the bed of a sleeping security guard—I could hardly conceive such a terribly inept thief.

Yet to entrust the guard of such a large sum of money to someone without their knowledge, the employer must be quite fearless—it might deter the thief, but I, living in that room, could potentially stumble upon it, that's a possibility no one could entirely deny.

On the flip side, it might mean that in the end, she trusts people over systems.

I feel honored to be trusted. It makes me want to live up to that trust.

"Feel free to use the shower or anything else," said Ms. Kyoko—"Feel free to use it."

An amount of roughly two hundred million yen that could be freely moved in an emergency... Although it falls short of the demanded target sum, it's a part of the precious money Ms. Kyoko worked hard to earn. I can't squander it.

The negotiation begins.

第二話　橙（だいだい）の監禁

Ch 2: The Orange Confinement

1

For me, this was a considerable saving of trouble and, all in all, a very convenient occurrence. However, I must admit it was quite impressive. Ms. Kyoko seemed to have immediately grasped the situation she found herself in upon waking—a remarkable clarity for the Forgetful Detective, who resets her memory with each sleep.

Perhaps it's precisely because she's the Forgetful Detective.

With the famous memo written on her left arm, she instantly understood that she was "Kyoko Okitegami," that she was "twenty-five years old," that she was a "detective," that she was the "head of the Okitegami Detective Agency," and that she was the Forgetful Detective whose memory resets every day—she also quickly realized that she was not in a bed but seated on a chair, tied up (as gently and loosely as possible) with rope, without any sign of confusion.

In this dim room without windows—a room that seemed unremarkable at first glance but was all the more unnerving for its lack of distinguishing features—she showed no sign of being frightened. If she had screamed here, it would have reverberated, which was a great relief to me.

Not only did it save me trouble, not to be practically bothered, but more importantly, it would be quite a letdown if the Forgetful Detective, whom I had gone through so much trouble to capture, were to react in such a banal and predictable manner.

I think it should be this way.

Yes, a detective must be nothing short of divine.

"Excuse me. Just to clarify, am I right to assume that you've kidnapped me?" she asked with a calm and relaxed tone—far from put off, it actually piqued my interest. I almost found myself uncharacteristically becoming verbose in response.

Driven by a childlike desire to enjoy an exchange of wits with the detective—it's a feeling akin to that of the mysterious thief, "The Fiend with Twenty Faces".

However, that goes against my objectives, or more precisely, against my principles.

It's not a matter of opposition; I must adhere to my own standards.

"Um... sorry,"

I decided to apologize first after some thought.

"I took the liberty of choosing your outfit. I can't match your sense of style, but I thought it wouldn't be right to disrupt your fashion rule of never wearing the same outfit twice due to such a trivial mishap, so I made a presumptuous decision."

I prepared moss green capri pants, an orange half-sleeve shirt, a slim gingham check vest, and shoes that matched the red socks and had a slight heel.

If I were to express a trend based on a detailed analysis of her "Observation Diary," Ms. Kyoko tends to choose fashion that doesn't expose much skin, even in the summer or the sweltering heat... This is based on a practical reason to cover the memos written on her skin.

That's precisely why I decided to play with a bit of sleight of hand, bringing a bold change to the norm—I aimed to mask the difference in taste with a staging that maintained a certain distance from her usual sense of style.

Well, there was also a purpose-driven motive to ensure she wasn't confused upon regaining consciousness by making sure the memo on her left arm was visible beforehand... Given that she was tied to a chair, I anticipated that she would not be able to roll up her sleeves, an act of forethought on my part akin to a strategic play on clothing.

And if I may add something extra, I also took that consideration into account with the chair—it's an antique armchair that I went through the trouble of importing from overseas. Ms. Kyoko may appear to be a rather active detective, contrary to her delicate image, but after all, the armchair suits a detective well.

Pleased or not, Ms. Kyoko shifted the armchair back and forth (perhaps just to check the strength of the ropes binding her wrists, ankles, and torso),

"A passing grade," she briefly said, with a light smile.

A passing grade? For what? Oh, for fashion sense—I never expected to be evaluated, so I was unexpectedly shocked.

"The size fits perfectly, and it's quite appealing. It even brings out the charm in my overly thin arms and legs. I wouldn't have thought to choose an orange open-collar shirt myself, as it's not a color scheme I'd typically go for, but as a playful touch, I find it acceptable—it's quite exciting, really. However, if I must be critical, the shoes are not good enough. The design is lovely, but when I picture the stance, in this case, it might have been cleaner without heels."

She had hit a sore spot. Despite my efforts and enthusiasm, the depth of ladies' shoes is simply too profound. I can't deny the feeling that I gave up somewhere along the line and said, 'that's it'.

"If you untie the rope, I'll prove it with a model walk. How does that sound?"

Her casual offer almost made me obediently release her restraints, but I caught myself at the last moment-whew, watch out, me.

I wasn't receiving a helpful lecture from a fashion school instructor—I was a heinous kidnapper facing the woman I had kidnapped.

But apparently I don't understand what heinous means. How does one behave in a heinous way? I've done all the preparation and rehearsals, but this is the first time I've kidnapped a detective in this way, so I don't know how to do it.

Upon reflection, I seemed to have provided quite the hospitality, preparing clothes and a chair—I felt more like an attendant than a kidnapper.

Perhaps it was this oddity that aroused suspicion,

"So? Are you going to kill me?"

Ms. Kyoko posed the question in an unchanged tone, yet suddenly hit the heart of the matter.

"After all, I am the 'Forgetful Detective.' I have no idea how I came to be confined here. But the fact that I'm not blindfolded, and instead am allowed to wear glasses and you're not wearing a mask while we face each other, does that mean you people have no intention of letting me live?"

"You're wrong, there's no 'you people'—"

I couldn't stop myself in time, inadvertently confessing that I was working alone—a trap question exploiting my vanity, perhaps, meant to assert that I wasn't collaborating with anyone or acting under orders.

Truly, the detective's rhetoric is terrifying. At this rate, she might strip bare all my personal information—I'm overwhelmed by the talent disparity when I consider the enormous amount of time it took to gather Ms. Kyoko's personal information for the kidnapping.

Well, it's fine.

Even if she extracts a great deal of information from me, it's of no consequence—it's the same as not minding being seen unmasked.

Because in the end, I'll kill her—no, that's not it. Precisely because she is the 'Forgetful Detective'—

Even if she sees my face, or even if she uncovers my entire identity without leaving anything hidden, just as I did in the old car, if I can successfully put her to sleep, all my sins will be neatly forgotten by her, wiped clean.

My crimes will be erased.

Therefore, I must tie the ropes loosely and take care not to leave marks on her skin—given her keen intuition, she might deduce that she was confined from any marks left by the bindings.

So, a blindfold is unnecessary.

Glasses might not have mattered either, but even in a modern world where smartphones connect us globally, I firmly believe that important conversations should be had while looking into each other's eyes.

Threatening phone calls are the exception.

"I don't intend to ki... harm you."

I spoke firmly. Well, to be more precise, I revised my words—I hesitated to utter the direct word "kill."

I wonder if she'll see me as an easy mark due to my lack of courage... well, it's better than her fearing me too much and causing a panic, I suppose.

What I have to do remains the same.

I continued.

"Right now, I am demanding a ransom from your subordinate. If the transaction goes smoothly, you'll be free to return home without any issues, of course, after having forgotten everything..."

"Ransom. Hmm, so I have a subordinate, do I? I was under the impression I was a hardboiled detective with no family ties. By the way, how much is the amount?"

Ms. Kyoko, notorious for being a cheapskate, immediately inquired about the specific sum—she might be the kind of person who wouldn't hesitate to ask a stranger about their annual income outright.

"One billion yen."

I saw no reason to lie, nor did I feel like a clumsy attempt at deception would do any good—it might even give away some other secret, so I answered honestly.

"One billion yen, you say?"

It didn't seem to come as a surprise. Ms. Kyoko sighed dramatically, as if let down.

"My intellect, which once commanded a price comparable to a fighter jet, seems to be undervalued."

"One billion yen is too low for you?"

When was this "once" she referred to? Her memory before the resets—or just a light-hearted remark? I can't let her mislead me.

"It's an amount I can tolerate. Either way, I have my doubts about whether this subordinate of mine has the financial capacity to pay."

Her subordinate—ah, that was right.

I had been stuck in this confinement room, wanting to see Ms. Kyoko wake up, but it's about time I call back to Okitegami Building.

I want to check on the movements of the security guard, Mamoru Oyagiri, the sole employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency—is he running around trying to raise the money as I demanded? Or has he defied my request and contacted the police?

Naturally, my response will depend on their actions—I wouldn't want to harm Ms. Kyoko if possible, but I can't deny the possibility that I may be cornered into a situation where I have no choice of means.

Of course, I know that the telephones in the Okitegami Building aren't equipped with a system for trace-back, but even so, I should be cautious enough to make a call from a public phone far away.

I take pride in being a lone criminal, but at times like this, I do wish for some extra hands.

Before that, I need to wrap up the conversation with Ms. Kyoko.

"Then, depending on the situation, we might consider raising the ransom—for now, I'm thinking of making a second threatening call to your subordinate to see how things are going, but what do you think, Ms. Kyoko? It must be boring for you to just wait idly, so how about we play a game in the meantime?"

"A game?"

"A puzzle, perhaps—a sort of mystery-solving game. I'd like to verify whether you truly possess the worth of one billion yen or even more as a hostage. I've already seen a glimpse of your capabilities just by talking to you, but still, I worry that one billion yen might be an excessive demand."

"Oh, what a fine thing to say. However, I see no reason why I should prove my capabilities—if it's just to reassure a kidnapper. If the ransom is reduced, my loyal subordinate will be relieved. It also helps to minimize unnecessary expenses."

I don't know about loyalty, but... calling one's own ransom an "unnecessary expense" takes quite a mental strength.

Rather than a cheapskate, she might be a god of thriftiness.

"There is a reason. If you win the game, I promise to provide a luxurious meal for you."

"...And if I were to lose?"

"Nothing much. You simply won't be provided with a luxurious meal."

"Oh my. So you'll serve a meager meal instead?"

"No, what are you implying? A meager meal would not suit you, Ms. Kyoko. If you lose, I'll provide nothing at all."

"Treating a prisoner harshly, huh? It's not something I can praise, but if that's the case, it seems I have no choice but to keep you company in killing time... After all, as you can see, I'm quite idle too."

'However, if it were truly just to kill time'—and with that, Ms. Kyoko casually mentioned something that seemed to probe into the other's intentions.

It seems it won't be that easy after all.

Normally, if you're suddenly challenged to a game and readily accept, it's difficult to know how to react—but that's not what I'd expect from an intellect valued at a billion yen.

Nevertheless, to have the "food" aspect of clothing, food, and shelter taken as collateral, she'd inevitably have to go along with it for the time being even as she sensed that I had something up my sleeve—that's what I thought, but it turned out not to be the case.

It seemed that was basically correct, but the reason she had agreed to go along with the game was not "food."

It was "clothing."

"I don't mind if the luxurious menu comes later, kidnapper. If I win, could you first prepare a different set of clothes for me? I'd like to change my shoes as well, but, um, you see, I'm not comfortable in short sleeves."

She wants to change clothes that badly.

I'm not getting a passing grade at all, am I?

2

"It's no use, not a single word more. The ransom is a billion yen. The price may go up, but it won't go down. I'll contact you again, so be ready by then."

The long-awaited second threatening call came in the middle of a night filled with anxious waiting, but the actual call lasted less than a minute—I was fully prepared and psyched up, but it ended up not being a negotiation at all.

That's what you call unyielding.

Having been rejected in such a manner, I felt like a miser trying to haggle down my boss's ransom, and I sank into a depression that hit harder than necessary.

In front of two hundred million yen, a dizzying amount of money, I felt as though I had taken a significant step toward resolving the situation, but the feeling of incompetence was particularly acute.

Thinking about it, even if I were to haggle, was it unreasonable to haggle down by eight hundred million yen—two hundred million is a large sum, but does that mean it's utterly outrageous to ask for an eight hundred million yen discount according to social norms?

When Mr. Kakushidate suggested that the outrageous demand for one billion yen was a technique to get more, that they didn't truly expect that much for the ransom, and that, in fact, a deal could be made even for one hundred million yen, I was convinced that made sense, but perhaps the kidnapper was dead serious in demanding one billion yen.

If they're saying to make the money even if it means selling off the building, that's just outrageous—or is there more of Kyoko's hidden wealth still buzzing around inside the estate that I haven't found?

Does the criminal know this and is proposing such a deal—how much the kidnapper invested in advance for this kidnapping plan is unclear, but if they planned it on the premise of getting one billion yen, it's possible they've moved money in a way that is almost impossible to imagine.

For instance, if they invested over five hundred million yen to get their hands on one billion, then a settlement at two hundred million would be out of the question... or maybe, it's just a prankster crime.

Maybe they're just demanding something impossible and want to see me flustered... But, no offense, do I really have that much value?

It might be possible the other way around.

If I, as an employee, were captured, and my employer, Ms. Kyoko, was asked for a billion yen, with the criminal enjoying as they watch a famous detective go haywire... That kind of tasteless entertainment is quite possible in its own way.

It's a challenge not to the reader, but to the famous detective.

There could be criminals who enjoy that kind of thing. The world is vast, and there are all sorts of people in it.

But why would anyone find joy in threatening me, a mere security guard who's not even the detective's assistant, causing me confusion? No one would praise them for such an act. Bullying me would only bring dishonor, not acclaim.

So, the kidnapper must be honestly—well, not honestly, but at least seriously—intent on obtaining that billion yen.

Anyway, not only were the negotiations unsuccessful, but I was so frustrated that I could not even confirm that Ms. Kyoko was safe-to my chagrin, I was so intent on negotiating the eight hundred million yen price reduction that I failed to make the request that I absolutely had to make this time: 'let me hear her voice'.

Given the kidnapper's attitude, it's hard to believe that they would have complied with such a request—even if they had, it seemed that the threatening call was made from a payphone.

Without a reverse tracking system or caller ID on a landline phone, and even for a security guard who doesn't know the first thing about detective work, some insights could be gleaned from the second threatening call.

It was nothing significant, but during the call, as if to mock my heated state, there was the sound of a coin clinking—probably the sound of a ten-yen coin being inserted for additional charges at a public phone.

It's risky to narrow down the suspect based on that alone, but it seems likely the person is not accustomed to using payphones—needing more money for a call so abruptly short suggests that the call was made across prefectural borders, without accounting for the increased call charges. If they had anticipated it, they would have started with a hundred-yen coin instead of hurriedly making noise with a ten-yen coin—they must have been careless, thinking ten yen would suffice since they planned to hang up quickly...

But that doesn't really matter.

After all, the first threatening call probably ended with just ten yen, so calling it carelessness is an exaggeration.

I don't have the skills to pinpoint the location of a public phone, and nowadays, most Japanese citizens are not familiar with using them.

Thinking that I've deduced anything significant from this would be premature—I haven't made any progress. But if I were to insist, the image of a criminal demanding a billion yen yet skimping on a hundred-yen coin does leave a slight sense of incongruity...?

Does the theory of this being a thrill-seeking criminal gain credibility? No, that would be quite troubling. If the criminal is a thrill-seeker not motivated by profit, then the likelihood of Ms. Kyoko returning safely diminishes.

I might feel like I'm the only one suffering from the criminal's absurd demands, but Ms. Kyoko herself, in captivity, might be subjected to unreasonable demands from the kidnapper.

It's been over twelve hours since Ms. Kyoko left, but is she getting proper meals? It may be foolish to expect hospitality from a criminal at a time like this...

Moreover, the criminal mentioned something troubling, or rather, something desperate... "The price may go up, but it won't go down." What's that supposed to mean? After demanding a billion yen, could they possibly be planning to ask for even more ransom?

Indeed, the value of a life, not just Ms. Kyoko's, may be worth tens of billions, or rather, it's said that life is priceless, but still, you can't give what you don't have.

Certainly, regarding the public phone matter, it may not be considered progress, but I did learn that the culprit isn't perfect. The preparatory research on Ms. Kyoko, the detective agency, and perhaps on me as well, may be thorough indeed, but the kidnapper wasn't fully versed in the use of public phones.

I shouldn't be crushed by self-deprecation and helplessness, and take that as a win-if I continue to bloat the image of the criminal too much, I won't be able to do anything about it. Whether it is a kidnapper or a murderer, it is still a human being, not a monster or a specter.

Still, it amounts to a deadlock.

Using the public phone, the culprit may indeed have made a very human mistake, but that's akin to finding a tiny inconsistency in a trick from a detective novel—it doesn't really impact the overall situation. The culprit might be expecting me to run around in search of more money (it's also possible that they got greedy because they initially bluffed and asked for one billion yen, yet I actually tried to pay them two hundred million yen, even though I didn't reach that amount-that's human nature too), but I don't think that approach is very constructive.

Is it finally time to ask the police for help?

Should have done so earlier, or perhaps from the very beginning, considering that there are things in this world that you can't do even if you're entrusted with two hundred million yen. It's not a lesson one should learn when being asked for a ransom, but... if I end up requesting assistance from the police in this predicament, Ms. Kyoko's ardent fan and esteemed client, Mr. Kakushidate, worries about irreversible damage to the detective's reputation, which I understand, but that's not something worth trading for her safety.

Worst case, even if she has to close down her detective business, as long as she's alive, there are prospects ahead—rather, unlike Mr. Kakushidate who staunchly believes "It's because she's a detective that she is Ms. Kyoko," I somehow have the impression that a boss like her would succeed at anything. A condition that resets memories every day could be useful for much more than just a forgetful detective.

She won't be left wandering the streets.

I might lose my job, but that's a trivial matter. I need to take responsibility for failing to guard Ms. Kyoko as a security guard.

Before reaching a conclusion, I'd like to consider opposing opinions, but the opposition, or rather, Mr. Kakushidate, who falls right into the forgetful detective's side, is currently playing the lead role in a wrongful accusation case, and is likely spending the night in a holding cell—I doubt I can get through even if I try to consult him again. His cell phone will probably have been confiscated by now.

I have no choice but to make my own decision. On my responsibility—with a sense of responsibility.

Despite that, trying to recover a belated decision by immediately dialing 110 isn't so simple—if it comes to reporting, I'm faced with the next difficult and troubling issue.

Although I've already considered it, instead of reporting rashly, it would be better to inform a detective familiar with the situation of the forgetful detective—namely, getting help from a patrol officer with experience as Ms. Kyoko's client would surely be the better arrangement. It makes the conversation easier, and I don't have to explain the detective's personal situation from scratch.

It's not as if a whole day has passed since she went missing, nor do I have a recording of the threatening phone call—I don't want to fumble the explanation and be mistaken for a civil dispute involving the detective agency.

As a forgetful detective who is sometimes unofficially relied upon by the police—considering the limited number of detectives I've taken messages for as a house-sitter, and since I don't keep detailed records of who is from which station and what detective they are (that's a rule of the Okitegami Detective Agency, and even as a security guard not directly involved in the cases, I'm only allowed to create lists of surveillance targets), the options are nearly nonexistent. However, I want to do even the slightest thing that could help Ms. Kyoko.

Officer Hijiori... Officer Tooasa... Officer Donma... Officer Sawazawa... Officer Oniniwa... Officer Yamanobe... Officer Hatoba... Officer Misuno... Officer Fujimura... Officer Momochihama... Officer Yusaka... Uh, who else could be considered a regular customer...

Ideally, I would like to contact the most capable officer, but unlike the detective business, ultimately, since teams are formed within the organization, individual skills might not be that relevant. Perhaps I should rely on an officer who has a strong connection to the kidnapping investigation squad—but the feelings of the clients, Ms. Kyoko's, are diverse. There are officers who have reluctantly come to her out of professional necessity or who have been ordered by their superiors to seek help from an outsider like Ms. Kyoko—frankly, even officers who harbored ill feelings towards the mercenary forgetful detective but made the bitter decision for the sake of solving the case.

While that may be unavoidable, it's still a little hard to rely on such people—I'm not saying they need to be as dedicated as Mr. Kakushidate, but it would be better if they were someone who could show genuine concern.

...Wait, hold on.

Isn't there someone? I shouldn't give up so easily. There might be someone within the police station who, possibly even more than Mr. Kakushidate, could show genuine concern for Ms. Kyoko.

Indeed, requests from the police to the forgetful detective are strictly confidential and unofficial, so coming in with a plea like "Please repay that favor from before!" would be embarrassingly inappropriate—after all, between clients, there's no debt when the mercenary collects her mercenary fees.

It's equal and flat.

Even seeking help here would be a breach of manners for the detective agency that uses forgetfulness as a shield—Ms. Kyoko's reputation is precisely because connections, or rather, entanglements, do not remain.

Like in a shonen manga where old friends rush to help the hero in a crisis—while that might be a hopeful wish, it's not something one should expect.

However, if we don't limit ourselves to clients related to work, there are plenty of fans of Ms. Kyoko within the police force. Although it's just a rumor and not certain, especially among the upper echelons of the National Police Agency, there's supposed to be a career officer who has formed an unofficial fan club—or so I hear. Ms. Kyoko herself mentioned something like that at a lecture once.

If I can contact such a police officer, they might approach the case with strong motivation, and since they are fans, they may minimize any potential damage to the reputation of the forgetful detective that might result from seeking police assistance.

That's it. That's the way to go.

Fortunately, I had a lead along those lines. Or rather, if I were to follow that lead, forget having almost no options—I only had one candidate lined up.

[redacted]

第三話 黄の問題集

[redacted]

Ch 3: The Yellow Problem Set

1

Upon leaving after making a threatening phone call to the Okitegami Detective Agency, I finally realized that I had been caught in the snare laid by the Forgetful Detective.

It was typical of the fashionable Ms. Kyoko to set the "prize" of the game to be "clothing" instead of "food" in the necessities of clothing, food, and shelter. I wasn't exactly impressed, but I found myself agreeably swallowing the idea, hook, line, and sinker. As a result, Ms. Kyoko, despite being deprived of her freedom and confined, has managed to put aside—or rather, secure—the problem of "food" among the necessities.

In other words, she avoided being taken hostage by the lifeline that is "food." No matter the outcome of the game, as a practical matter, it would be inconvenient for me if Ms. Kyoko starved to death, so naturally, I had no choice but to provide her with meals.

I might have become a bit too stubborn after Ms. Kyoko implied, in a roundabout way, that the clothes I had prepared were unfashionable. And yet, if she failed to solve the three "workbooks" I left on her lap in the comfy chair as a first step, I had planned a little spite, thinking of making her wear something sporty, which she would never usually choose. That shows I'm too nice for my own good.

What thick skin I have.

I can't quite make it as a malicious criminal.

But let's consider it good enough.

After all, it might turn out to be more desirable in the end—to keep Ms. Kyoko confined, her maintaining a cooperative attitude is indispensable.

It's unreasonable to keep her tied up in a chair forever (though not too tightly bound)—after all, humans need to eat, change clothes, sleep, and wake up; in other words, they have to live, or rather, survive.

If left alone, she might die, and if pushed too mentally, she might even bite her tongue—Ms. Kyoko appears carefree, but she is actually quite proud. The risk that she might choose death over humiliation or disgrace is real—or perhaps she has resigned herself to thinking, "Anyway, I'll forget once I sleep."

In any case, until I achieve my goal, I need Ms. Kyoko to stay healthy and live energetically—if I may express a wish, I'd like her to fall prey to Stockholm syndrome.

It would be perfect if Ms. Kyoko came to feel affection and closeness to me, her kidnapper—if she thought of me as amiable and too nice to be a bad guy, nothing could be better.

I want her to like me.

That's why, when the time is right, I will have no choice but to release Ms. Kyoko from the restraints of the comfy chair. She can't live or survive tied up like that. I might as well graciously untie the ropes. What does it matter? After all, escape from that room—from that "locked room"—is impossible.

There's no trick in that locked room. It's a simple closed space, and no matter how much noise she makes, none of it will leak outside—it's a room prepared solely for the purpose of confining Ms. Kyoko, so that's only natural.

As an initial investment, it cost considerably more than that old car—but now I can say it was worth it.

Speaking of money, that was unexpected, Mamoru Oyagiri.

The fact that the sole employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency and the security guard living and working in the Okitegami Building managed to prepare two hundred million yen in such a short time was honestly surprising.

Not only was I surprised that he had prepared two hundred million yen, but also that he tried to haggle over the ransom—it was more than surprising; it was abnormal. Although I have never met him directly, my preliminary research indicated that he was honest and not flexible (which is why he was somewhat unfairly fired from his previous job), so I didn’t expect him to boldly negotiate the ransom like that.

Certainly, I had thought him to be amenable, yet perhaps I should be more wary of him.

Although I bluntly rejected his offer of a deal for two hundred million yen, inwardly, I nearly carelessly agreed—it's hard to imagine such an amount being mere pocket change for him, so it seems likely that this money is in fact the wealth that Ms. Kyoko had amassed within the building.

You can discern the workings of the Forgetful Detective.

While it was an unexpected calculation, it was also a pleasant miscalculation—though I had thought it safe to leave things be for a while, it now seems wise to make frequent contact with the Okitegami Building, just to see how things are going.

It's hard to predict what Mamoru Oyagiri might do next... if he were simply scrambling around for money, that would be ideal, but it's possible that even from such a brief conversation, he might have gleaned hints from me.

Using a payphone to get in touch seemed like a clever choice at first, but when you actually try to find one in modern society, it's quite difficult, and even if you go through the trouble of finding one, there are invariably security cameras watching.

I'm just indulging the feeling of being a kidnapper, influenced by TV dramas, but it's starting to seem more efficient to simply use a cell phone and make an anonymous call. To avoid having my location traced from the call, I'd still need to travel, but there might be better ways. There's so much I won't know until I try.

Let's believe that it will be worth the effort.

Becoming somewhat neurotic, I repeatedly took roundabout routes as a precaution, returning to my self-made "sealed chamber."

It was about a two-hour outing, but by now, Ms. Kyoko should have finished solving the three "puzzle books" I had handed over.

Maybe I'm possessed by a slightly perverse emotion, but I was looking forward to what kind of stylish clothes Ms. Kyoko would request as a "prize" more than winning the game itself—but things never go according to plan.

"*Light snoring*,"

she was.

Ms. Kyoko nodded off while rocking the recliner back and forth... There were signs that she had looked over the "puzzle books" on her lap, but whatever answers she had come up with, now they served no more purpose than a knee blanket—for once she fell asleep, Ms. Kyoko would lose the memories of "today."

Indeed, restraining her in the recliner turned out to be a mistake. No matter how comfortable it may be, falling asleep in this environment is inexcusably audacious... alas, this cannot be called a pleasant miscalculation. It's a sad, total loss.

The Stockholm syndrome strategy needs to start over. I should have released her from the recliner without making such a fuss—very well.

I will repeat it as many times as necessary. Failure or not, crime or not, I'll repeat it every time, time after time, until I achieve my goal.

2

"Um... Mr. Oyagiri. Given the circumstances, I really don't understand why you would call me... I mean, out of all the police officers working in Japan, I'm probably the most steadfastly opposed to Ms. Kyoko Okitegami."

When he stated it so bluntly, it was hard to continue the conversation, but of course, I was well aware of this from the start—even amid dire straits and confusion, I'm not so naive as to think that Officer Hidarui would be an ally of Ms. Kyoko.

On the contrary, Officer Hidarui might well be considered her archenemy—a stubborn archenemy. There was an incident that strayed somewhat outside the bounds of the Forgetful Detective's confidentiality, which is how someone like me, an "outsider," came to know about it—during that event, Ms. Kyoko had been at odds with this officer.

It wasn't so much a conflict, but rather, Ms. Kyoko was arrested by Officer Hidarui (or was it one of his subordinates?), and spent the night in the police station's underground detention cell.

Well, given the circumstances, it could be said she deserved it, but still, it felt like a form of confinement.

The renowned detective often ends up in such binds.

However, it's not like I pinned the blame on Officer Hidarui as a "suspect" with a previous record of confining Ms. Kyoko—though I won't deny I hoped he might offer some helpful opinions when imagining Ms. Kyoko's current situation. But originally, I had no intention of seeking help from Officer Hidarui.

While Ms. Kyoko was living carefree in the detention cell, unaware of others' concerns, there must have been a police officer who had made accommodations for her at that station—I haven't identified who it might be, but it's certain there's a "Ms. Kyoko fan" who deviated from their duties.

My only lead was this police officer, and definitely not Ms. Kyoko's archenemy, Officer Hidarui—although I had thought to ask for his intercession, he is, as expected, an imposing and formidable officer.

He hasn’t been called the "False Accusations Factory" for nothing (though that's a rather harsh nickname), and even over the phone, he seemed to sense the hesitation in my tone, which led to his questioning me.

Perhaps I wanted someone to talk to, to ease my burden, and so I couldn't stick to my original resolution and ended up revealing almost everything about the Okitegami Detective Agency to

Officer Hidarui. Well, since I didn't disclose any case information brought by a client, it shouldn't be a breach of confidentiality... but to think that I ended up seeking help from Ms. Kyoko's arch-enemy, of all people.

Things just don't go as planned.

Why did I even think it would work out?

I once again marvel at Ms. Kyoko's and Mr. Kakushidate's courage to withstand such interrogations and their predisposition to false accusations.

What's done is done.

It was a minor detail anyway.

"Well, in that sense, I am a client of Ms. Kyoko's, although at that time, it felt like I was coerced into making the request."

So there was a backstory like that. Then I've made an even bigger mistake in choosing him to ask for help... but even so, surely not even her arch-enemy would shelve this report. I'll leave the investigation to the police and quietly make my exit...

But then,

"No, perhaps I should keep this matter under my jurisdiction for now,"

Officer Hidarui suggested—what's that you say?

"Think about it, Mr. Oyagiri. A ransom demand of one billion yen is preposterous. To put it mildly, it sounds like a cruel joke. Obviously, it's not an amount one would demand from an individual."

As the person being threatened, I should welcome a third party's sound arguments, which is why I called Mr. Kakushidate for advice. However, the sound arguments returned by Officer Hidarui were, unfortunately, not what I expected.

In that sense, I keep choosing the wrong people to consult.

I wanted Mr. Kakushidate to say, "You should call the police immediately! If you won't, I will!" but instead, he dissuaded me with his strong fan spirit, and when I finally decided to call the police officer, I was expecting a "Understood! Leave everything to us from here!" but instead, I was told to drop the subject.

However, this sound argument was more painful to hear than the one I was hoping for—I mean, I also thought it was an absurd and ridiculous amount.

Partially because Ms. Kyoko is a cheapskate, and her savings amount is unknown—and even though it's not one billion yen, I did find a hidden asset of two hundred million yen—somehow, I just couldn't continue to think about it any longer. No matter how I interpret it from any angle, it lacks a sense of reality.

It felt as if I was in the midst of being engrossed in an anime, and someone had just told me: 'no no, humans can't fly in the sky'.

It was more like receiving a prank call than a threatening one—if Officer Hidarui were to pass it on to the specialized department, would they take it seriously? If an elementary school student didn’t come home even after nightfall, well, of course, the police would start moving seriously... But we're talking about a grown adult here.

Twenty-five years old.

Due to being a forgetful detective, the accuracy of that age is questionable, but at the very least, it’s certain that she isn't underage—would a missing adult woman really be treated as a case, just because she hasn’t come home for one night?

I'm the only one asserting this, and there's no evidence—this makes it all the more regrettable that I didn't demand the kidnapper to let me hear Ms. Kyoko's voice.

"Please don't misunderstand. I'm not doubting your words, Mr. Oyagiri, nor do I think it's a prank call, nor do I believe it’s a prank by Ms. Kyoko herself."

I hadn't considered the playful possibility of it being a prank by Ms. Kyoko—"he doesn't believe so" he says, but the fact that he's precisely brought up such a possibility makes me feel the remnants of the sparks that once flew between the False Accusations Factory and the forgetful detective.

"Rather, I can't help but think that the kidnapper's aim might be there."

? What does he mean?

"The kidnapper's goal may be to immobilize the only kin of the forgetful detective, which is you, Mr. Oyagiri, and to isolate you in your anxiety—whether you're running around for money or trying to convince the police who won't believe the story, it will take your time, won't it?"

Time... Well, it's somewhat embarrassing to be referred to as Ms. Kyoko's only kin, but, well, considering the forgetful detective has severed ties with society, in the sense that I'm the only employee she has, it might be true.

Since I'm the closest to Ms. Kyoko, who has no known parents or relatives, I thought it was by chance that I ended up with the ransom demand, but looking from the kidnapper's perspective, I could well be the biggest nuisance.

In other words, if there wasn't a security guard like me, even if Ms. Kyoko went missing, there would be no kin to file a missing person report, no investigation team would be formed—clients who are regulars (like Mr. Kakushidate, for example) might feel something amiss when they try to make a request and get struck out, but the detective profession itself is, to begin with, a kind of rootless profession. Just as there was a time before, people might just think she took off to Europe on a whim... So, conversely, it means that if the kidnapper can just immobilize me, the risk of kidnapping greatly decreases.

Because.

"Because Ms. Kyoko is the Forgetful Detective. Even if she saw the kidnapper's face, even if she became a victim of the heinous crime of kidnapping, after she sleeps and wakes up, she would forget everything," Officer Hidarui said with a hint of a grudge, as if he still hadn't forgotten the pain caused by her all-too-refreshing forgetfulness in the case he handled. Hmm. It's truly troubling whom I have sought help from—I'm sorry. But if I may say so without regard for his feelings, his advice is invariably precise.

"As a kidnapping target, you could say it’s low-risk. Kidnapping a renowned detective who is a pro at criminal investigation might seem reckless at first glance, but once that’s dealt with."

Then one billion yen would be in hand.

No, that's not it... the demand is a bluff to immobilize me and also to decrease the chances they take me seriously when I report it to the police, that's what Officer Hidarui is suggesting.

"Perhaps the kidnapper was taken aback when a hidden asset of two hundred million yen came to light."

I wonder. Come to think of it, when I received the second threatening call, the criminal seemed surprised—their outright refusal to negotiate a lower ransom might have been a reflexive response prompted by being caught off guard.

A rejection reaction.

Maybe the kidnapper feared that with this man's abilities, they might indeed be able to muster one billion yen. Hence, the kidnapper didn't just refuse to bargain but even hinted at the possibility of raising the ransom.

What is this "with this man's abilities" anyway... There's Mr. Kakushidate's theory that the criminal started with an exorbitant demand, intending to negotiate down to the actual target amount, and my theory that the criminal is a thrill-seeker, tormenting the victim for fun.

A third theory to consider comes from Officer Hidarui, who suggests that the criminal is not after money but after time—a theory that seems to stand out, even more, when placed beside the others.

Ah, that's right.

Even if the criminal had an absolute need for one billion yen, it doesn't explain why they couldn't accept two hundred million yen—their coldness was as if to say, if they can't have one billion yen, they don't need two hundred million yen at all.

If the criminal desperately wanted one billion yen or was just a thrill-seeker causing trouble, wouldn't they consider snatching the two hundred million yen at least for the time being?

Both I and Mr. Kakushidate tend to overvalue the Forgetful Detective, but Officer Hidarui, who is not afraid to express negative opinions, seems to have a strong sense of discomfort about the exorbitant ransom demand of 1 billion yen, which is far too high for a kidnapping case. Pointing it out is something that makes us feel embarrassed and difficult to refute... We also have a sense of discomfort, but we are able to put it aside. So, what does that lead to?

If one billion yen is a red herring and the criminal is not a thrill-seeker... then the kidnapper's objective might be something entirely different.

Frankly, it's a possibility I'd rather not contemplate... perhaps unconsciously, I've been averting my eyes from it, as the "only family." Demanding one billion yen is an incredibly unreasonable demand, but if the kidnapper's motive were profit, there could be room for negotiation. It's akin to human trafficking, ethically dubious, but money is, after all, meant to be used in such ways—if it can be solved with money, then it should be.

At the very least, I cannot adopt a tough stance of refusing to pay the kidnapper just because I don't want to submit to a violent criminal—but if the criminal's objective isn't money, things get quite complicated.

By process of elimination, it becomes inevitable that Ms. Kyoko herself is the goal—the success rate for profit-driven kidnappings is extremely low due to the high risk involved in the exchange of ransom. But if the ransom isn't what they're after, all that risk is nullified.

Suppose that at the moment of the abduction, the crime is already complete—in this case, Ms. Kyoko isn't even a hostage.

...Could it be a quest for revenge?

Ms. Kyoko, as the forgetful detective, has resolved an unbelievable number of cases in such a short time span due to her unique condition, solving cases within a day. With such a high caseload, the likelihood of irregularities increases, and it's conceivable that there would be criminals bearing a grudge against the detective who solved their case.

Certainly, once Ms. Kyoko has resolved a case, she forgets not only the culprit but even the details of the incident. It's like the japanese expression: "the one who does it forgets, but the one it was done to never forgets." As a business owner, Ms. Kyoko distributes her business cards here and there, making her an easy target for those harboring grudges seeking revenge.

It goes without saying, that's one reason why Ms. Kyoko lives in a fortress-like building and employs me as a security guard. Even with constant vigilance, it is said to be difficult to completely prevent assassination, and, likewise, kidnapping cannot be ruled out.

In such a case, should it be called kidnapping or abduction?

According to the dictionary definition, it is called kidnapping when taken without violence, and abduction when violence is involved. Nevertheless, the hopeful assumption that Ms. Kyoko will be safe until a ransom is paid proves to be wishful thinking that vanishes into thin air.

Her safety, let alone her life, is in jeopardy.

Alternatively, a completely different motive unrelated to revenge could be considered—different, or rather, opposite. It becomes clear when picturing Mr. Kakushidate as the perpetrator.

A case of love gone too far, leading to a heinous act. Kidnapping out of affection—though things tend to blur when living and working closely together, even without considering her role as a detective, Ms. Kyoko has a stylish and eye-catching presence. It wouldn't be far-fetched to suspect that a brute wanted to claim her as his own.

Well, fortunately, or perhaps a silver lining in misfortune, Mr. Kakushidate currently has a rock-solid alibi since he’s caught up in the police station, so he won’t be wrongfully accused in this matter.

"Though it might not be comforting to hear, could it be that the kidnapper has a more concrete objective?" said Officer Hidarui cautiously, choosing his words. He seems to be considerate of me, though it makes his true intention a bit difficult to grasp. He's an awkward man.

"In other words, if the demand for one billion yen is a misdirection to buy time, the criminal may intend to release Ms. Kyoko eventually. Delaying the report, preventing the case from becoming public, and preparing somewhere to wrap up the crime."

I wonder if that's more hopeful speculation than consolation. But since Officer Hidarui, who is not exactly a fan of Ms. Kyoko, suggests it, there might be some truth to it.

What resets is Ms. Kyoko's memory alone—the more time passes since her disappearance, the more likely I am to give up on raising money and to risk reporting to the police. A day or two may pass unnoticed, but if the period of disappearance exceeds a week or two, even the police will have to act.

Then it becomes doubtful whether the kidnapper can escape—caught immediately or not, they might have to spend a lifetime on the run.

If they're prepared for that, they wouldn't waste time with such diversions. That's one way to see it.

Considering the subsequent life on the run, it would seem they'd avoid making threatening calls or any contact with the victim's family—in this case, me. The threatening calls happened not just once but twice.

It was of some comfort.

Just like in the kidnapping for ransom scenario, the likelihood of kidnapping out of revenge or affection must continue to be considered. However, if the perpetrator has a different motive altogether, what could it be?

"It's also conceivable that the grudge is against you, Mr. Oyagiri," added Officer Hidarui.

I don't know how conceivable that would be-what kind of grudge would someone have against me that would lead to my boss being kidnapped?

"I think that the target wasn't so much Ms. Kyoko herself, but rather, her detective abilities—not so much the 'forgetfulness' of the 'Forgetful Detective,' but the emphasis is more on the 'detective' aspect."

Even if kidnapped, since the person kidnapped would forget the event, it wouldn't become a case—so if one thinks that Ms. Kyoko was targeted with a focus on "forgetfulness," then it would be natural to assume that the kidnapper overlooked the risk of kidnapping a professional detective. However, Police Officer Hidarui, who calls himself a cynic, brought up an idea I didn't have.

It's not that she was kidnapped "despite being" a detective.

But because she "is" a detective?

Calling it a Copernican revolution might sound too grandiose, but for me, who until just a moment ago was caught up only in thoughts of ransom, it's quite a plot twist—although I don't fully understand its implications, it feels like the right answer.

It's a vague feeling, but... at least I wouldn't question the existence of someone who finds value worth more than one billion yen in the fastest detective's brain.

Not out of revenge or affection, but could it be that the kidnapper is trying to "use" the famous detective? And not in an ordinary way, as a client through legitimate routes, because that would hardly secure Ms. Kyoko's cooperation for the kind of "use" in question...

It's starting to come together—I think.

If the kidnapper's goal is to coerce Ms. Kyoko into complicity with criminal acts, then at least no immediate violence will be used... And if the background check was truly thorough, they'd know that this famous detective is incredibly moody and won't do good work unless others play along with her.

She is a slave to money, pledging absolute loyalty to her master, so she will never become a criminal's slave—at least, not a good one.

Although I can't imagine she's being treated with the utmost respect, she isn't being forced at knifepoint to use her abilities... In this, one regrettably has to hope in the kidnapper's rationality and intellect, as the goal is not her fashion or wealth, but something intrinsic, so she won't be used and discarded outright.

"I may be against Ms. Kyoko, but as you know, I owe you a favor. Unlike the Forgetful Detective, I will not forget that—and let me tell you from that point of view, if I contact the specialized department now, not only will there be no investigation, but you will also not be able to move. 'Don't do anything unnecessary'—isn't that what the kidnapper is aiming for?"

That hypothesis is very plausible... However, now that Officer Hidarui knows this, won't he be compelled to file a report?

"I'm a bad cop, after all. Let's just reject it as being out of my jurisdiction."

Is that alright...? No, this is a situation where I should gratefully acknowledge the help. Ignoring—or perhaps because of—his conflict with Ms. Kyoko, if Officer Hidarui has offered advice outside of the organization, I should not hesitate, but appreciate it until I have exhausted all that should be done. An unexpected development it may be, but different perspectives have been introduced.

However... the crucial point still eludes me.

There once was an unbelievable phantom thief who used Ms. Kyoko to try to steal the Eiffel Tower, but... what exactly does the kidnapper intend to make the captured detective do this time?

Although it's not one billion yen, the kidnapper is demanding something with an asset value of at least two hundred million yen–paying no heed to someone like me, almost as if they wish that their threatening calls would be reported as prank calls, what is the unfathomable conspiracy hidden behind this deeply laid plot?

3

Ms. Kyoko seems to have fallen into a deep sleep, and at this rate, she won't wake up until tomorrow morning–this isn't going according to the simulation.

Or rather, is it possible that Ms. Kyoko, not merely succumbing to the comfort of the easy chair, understood my intentions and deliberately began to reset her memory?

I am a person of such modesty that I wouldn't consider myself a theatrical criminal, but I'm sure I haven't made any noticeable slips–still, I may have underestimated the observant eye of the forgetful detective.

Even if not blindfolding, should I have taken away her glasses?

Reflecting on it, there's a significant possibility that Ms. Kyoko guessed from my behavior that my aim wasn’t ransom–could the conversation around that point have led her to deduce that my ultimate goal as a kidnapper wasn't money?

Simply observing her peaceful sleeping face doesn't make it seem so, but as far as research goes, this person is quite the strategist.

Perhaps what really grounded the suspicion was not the behavior but the game I offered in exchange for a meal–I felt a bit rushed when I proposed it, and she might have sensed something then, but even so, as Ms. Kyoko is the forgetful detective, she shouldn't be able to uncover the true nature of the matter.

The negotiation for clothing instead of a meal was a sign of my half-doubt at that moment–maybe she truly began suspecting when she saw the three "workbooks" I had placed on her lap.

Was the memory Ms. Kyoko tried to reset, whether carelessly or thick-facedly pretending to sleep, meant to be wiped clean because she had read the "puzzle problems" in those workbooks and had solved the answers–did she deduce the need to reset to zero with her characteristic exhaustive reasoning, without any evidence?

If so, I might have to retract my approach of probing with a game under the guise of a test... As I think this, I glance at the "workbooks" I have retrieved from Ms. Kyoko's lap.

The three "workbooks"–their titles are as follows:

"The Sarashina Research Institute Emii Laboratory's Confidential Data Theft Case"
"The Atelier House Case"
"The Dismemberment Murder of the Unemployed Male (37) Case"

Did she keenly figure it out?

That these quizzes were puzzle-solving picked from the casebook of the forgetful detective–cases she had solved and now completely forgotten.

If Ms. Kyoko had been lured by the meal or clothing, and joined the game, thinking it was just for fun, and had derived the "answers" to these quizzes, she would have broken the strict rule of "absolute confidentiality" that is the hallmark of the Okitegami Detective Agency–did she avoid such a forbidden situation with animal-like instinct or a detective's intuition?

If so–I've lost count of how many times I've been impressed–well done, Ms. Kyoko.

But even though it was not the outcome I had wanted, it is still what I desired. What I wanted to know was not the truth of the three cases themselves (I would be lying if I said I did not want to know the truth of the third case, the dismemberment and murder of an unemployed man [37], which is a particularly heinous crime that has caused a lot of publicity. I am as curious as anyone else).

It was merely a test.

When Ms. Kyoko confronted the cases she once handled, investigated, and solved, all while having completely forgotten them, I wondered if she could solve them in the same way again—this was a test of reproducibility.

I'm not bold enough to go straight into the main event without preparation. Between you and me, even in planning Ms. Kyoko's abduction, I first practiced several times with ordinary women—of course, keeping it to a level that wouldn't turn into an incident. I can't become a villain.

Truth be told, the reproducibility test, which lacked even a speck of game element, didn't turn out to be very successful, but the fact that Ms. Kyoko noticed and chose to reset her memory during my absence could be proof that she solved the "workbooks" thoroughly—whether that's the case or not, the attempt itself might have been an effective approach, right?

It was effective, and that's why the forgetful detective needed to roll back her consciousness to zero base—feigning a comfortable sleep, she felt compelled to reset her memory, including my existence.

She's the very detective who resets her memories like a game.... If that's the case, even if I have to change the method of having her reproduce the old puzzles with the pretense of a game, as if reading a mystery novel, the direction is not wrong.

I'm walking the right path.

Two hundred million yen or even one billion yen, frankly, is not what I'm after. What's the cost of the necessary expenses and the initial investment I've made so far?

It's not money. What I want is information. To draw out information, not savings, from Kyoko Okitegami.

Information is my weapon, and information is my prey.

Thorough preliminary research makes it possible to even abduct a detective.

All the vast confidential information related to the various colossal and intricate criminal cases that the forgetful detective has continued to forget throughout her career—if I succeed in restoring the reset data and monopolizing it, the profit I will gain will undoubtedly reach astronomical figures.

第四話　水の捜索

Ch 4: The Green Manhunt

1

As is often said in the streets, time progresses equally for all—be it for the forgetful detective, the kidnapper, or the security guard hired by the forgetful detective, a day is the same length. If one person's day is twenty-four hours, it isn't as though someone else's is thirty hours or another's is twenty hours.

However, on the other hand, time is also a very relative thing—the day for the forgetful detective, the day for the kidnapper, and the day for the security guard hired by the forgetful detective are never quite the same.

Nevertheless, I must follow the forgetful detective's style here. That is to say, I must live each day as if it were my whole life, and think of each day as if it were my entire life—if there's any advantage to be had over the detestable kidnapper (I suppose it's okay to say so), it lies solely there.

Although I can't be absolutely certain, there's a reasonable level of trust in the theory that the request for a ransom of a nice round figure like one billion yen is a way to buy time, targeted at various parties. This means that, as of now, the perpetrator has time that they want to earn—what they want to buy time for, I do not know. I feel there might be multiple reasons—I'm not detective-minded enough to deduce that far.

But what's important here is that the kidnapper must currently believe that I am frantically running about trying to raise funds—or that I have sought help from the police, been ignored, and am in a state of desperate confusion.

Even if there was preliminary research, it's unlikely that it could have predicted the existence of a rogue bad cop like Officer Hidarui—let alone his innermost feelings—, with an overflowing animosity towards Ms. Kyoko.

Thus, the question is how to use this time I have at the moment.

What to do between now and the next threatening phone call with their ransom demand—possibly a feint to assess the situation?—... while the perpetrator thinks I am just panicking.

I must use tonight effectively. Not wasting even a minute.

There's no need to look for more money. Two hundred million yen is already too much. Perhaps there's still more gold and treasure hidden within the Okitegami Building, but rather than searching for that, there's something else I should seek—I don't know what, but something.

Something like a clue.

I'm not a detective, nor an investigator, but there are things that only I can understand—things that only someone who works in the same place as Ms. Kyoko can understand.

When I first received the threatening call, I was as flustered as could be, but naturally, after more than twelve hours, one calms down, no matter how unwillingly—let's get back to "kidnapping the forgetful detective."

Is such a thing possible?

Ms. Kyoko, whose memory resets in a day, seems carefree but is actually quite vigilant—more like a wild cat than a stray. Even as she wears a friendly smile, if you get too close, she'll skillfully dodge and disappear somewhere.

Mr. Kakushidate and others have been completely taken in by her "way of living"... she handles them quite easily. How did the perpetrator manage to abduct such a woman like her?

Thorough preliminary research. Likely.

The perpetrator must have databased Ms. Kyoko's behavioral patterns, analyzed them statistically, and executed the plan at the most opportune timing—but then, why was today (though it's about to become yesterday date-wise) the appropriate day for the crime?

It was her day off. Likely.

During work, there's a high possibility that a police officer is near Ms. Kyoko—perhaps a client or even the perpetrator of another case might be around. I don't know if there's anything such as territorial disputes between criminals, but however you analyze it, targeting a detective during their "on" days is absurd.

But that doesn't necessarily mean it's suitable to target her on her days off—even on holidays, there's no slack in Ms. Kyoko's vigilance. Her constitution, which resets her memory each day, doesn't care if it's a day off or not.

In fact, one could say that holidays are the days when she can concentrate solely on her defense.

Therefore, it's highly unlikely for her to be easily deceived by a criminal approaching with malice—the criminals must have known this too.

So what made today special?

Was it the clothes she wore? Ms. Kyoko, who never wears the same outfit twice—her commitment to changing even her pajamas daily is astonishing.

Certainly, that is a characteristic feature of the "forgetful detective," other than "her memory resetting every day," but since she never repeats the same outfit, one can't catalog it. The data simply increases frivolously, spreading out without stacking up. There's no way to establish criteria like "she's in a good mood on skirt days" or "she's more open when she's wearing heels," like some sort of fortune-telling. There's just too much variation.

This means you can't discern a pattern.

So, the criminal must not have based their approach on this—since there are other points to note. Ms. Kyoko, who has never been seen wearing the same clothes twice, does have patterns in her other behaviors.

For example, the art museum where I worked before landing this demanding job—she visited many times, always moved by the same painting.

It's a memory I can't quite articulate now (as Ms. Kyoko has forgotten), but if one knew of Ms. Kyoko's pattern of visiting the museum repeatedly, one could potentially lie in wait near the museum—right? Well, this is true for any abduction, not just for the forgetful detective, if one knew in advance that the person would repeatedly visit the museum to view the same painting.

However, that painting no longer exists.

Still—if there are other patterns that Ms. Kyoko repeats, it could be said that she repeats everything except fashion... although, in a sense, this could be said for all humans, not just the forgetful detective. But among them, Ms. Kyoko stands out—it's obvious when you watch her, a distinctiveness that is characteristic of the forgetful detective.

She reads the same book over and over again.

2

Despite being strictly told not to enter the bedroom, there might come a time when I have to break that rule—let's say this is one step before that, an invasion of privacy.

I decided to take a look at Ms. Kyoko's bookshelf.

This morning, or rather yesterday morning in terms of the date, when Ms. Kyoko was heading out from the building, she had a paperback book with her—I remember well because I warned her not to read while walking and not to stash it away in her handbag.

Her response to my earnest warning was:

"Stop nagging me. Are you my parent?"

—She's often in a bad mood in the morning. It's not due to low blood pressure, but simply because, right after waking up, she's "meeting" me, her employee, for the first time and her guard is particularly up.

When she asks if I'm her parent, and I reply that I'm not a parent but "Oyagiri", this too is a pattern—but that pattern is, well, trivial. It's just a family routine. As her only family.

*TL Note: as stated in volume 2, “Oyagiri” can be read as “to cut parents”

What concerns me is the title of the book Ms. Kyoko took with her this morning—I can't remember that much. I never thought what she reads would be important for security—but, her reading preferences might have been particularly crucial in planning her abduction.

"Ah, that book, I like it too. Can we talk for a bit? Actually, I have a first edition of that novel at home," or perhaps, "Actually, I'm the author of that book"—is that how it goes? When put into words, it seems like an utterly hopeless attempt at picking someone up, not to mention unoriginal, but somehow, I feel this approach isn't entirely off the mark.

As for the success rate, it would probably be more appropriate to compliment someone's sense of fashion, but since it's impossible to predict someone's outfit in advance, that kind of approach is impossible (unless the person in question is already brimming with style, which means, as of now, the most likely suspect is a top-tier fashion designer).

However, unlike Mr. Kakushidate, who is a severe Ms. Kyoko maniac, I don't know every book in her collection—in fact, I usually stay away from the bookshelves. Because Ms. Kyoko dislikes it.

Unlike the bedroom, she has never verbally stated so, but it seems she doesn't like her books being tampered with.

The bookshelves are meticulously organized by genre, size, author's name alphabetically, and year of publication—a clear reflection of Ms. Kyoko's personality, resembling a bookstore or a library.

No, it's more like a reference room.

For the detective Kyoko, there's no such thing as references—bound by the absolute rule of confidentiality, Ms. Kyoko believes that old documents have no significance in her detective work.

So the books in this library are solely based on Ms. Kyoko's personal interests—mostly detective novels, that is. Then there are, well, cookbooks, dictionaries, self-help books (?!), and even ones like "How to Write a Novel." Is she thinking of writing one?

Certainly, even without being expressly forbidden from doing so, it seems there's no room for me to meddle with the management of this library (and given this, one can only imagine what the walk-in closet holds). However, in front of bookshelves arranged so tightly and orderly, there's not much room to intervene, but there is room to think.

Room to think, or rather, gaps yet to be filled.

In other words, lacking the observational skills of a detective (I'm not one, after all), I've forgotten the title of the paperback that Ms. Kyoko took out, but if I could find a noticeable gap in the lineup of books, it wouldn't be impossible to guess the forgotten title—that's the idea.

Literally filling gaps.

If there's a gap in the Conan Doyle section, nestled between "A Study in Scarlet" and "His Last Bow," then it could be deduced that the book Ms. Kyoko took out was "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes"... this is a flimsy method of elimination based on the assumption that the complete set is there, but it's all I have to cling to.

Luckily, I had a clue.

Without having to comb through every bookshelf, there's a trend that even I can discern, you only have to read the signs—no pun intended.

It's probably a work by Hirubei Sunaga.

Even though Ms. Kyoko, the forgetful detective, can experience the "first reading" of the same book over and over, it's one of the authors she would likely "re-read" repeatedly, even if she were not an forgetful detective—a proud Japanese mystery writer, Hirubei Sunaga... if the criminal, plotting her abduction, had been observing her.

If there's a book that sparks the ideas of "She keeps re-reading that book," "Maybe that tendency can be used for something," the likelihood that it's a work by Hirubei Sunaga is quite high—is this a forced argument? But without being bold, one cannot deduce.

And so, I began by searching the Hirubei Sunaga section in the library—and to my anticlimactic surprise, I found the gap right away. It was so anticlimactic that it made me anxious, but this is

where the anticlimax is probably supposed to be—if it wasn't this obvious, the kidnapper wouldn't be able to plan their crime around it.

As planned, I checked the titles on both sides of the gap.

"Unreported Crime"—space—"Chartreuse Boy".

It seems that the books in the author's corner are arranged not by series, but purely based on the year of publication, so I just need to look up the title of the book that was published between these two. How do I find out the title of a book that doesn't exist here? Fortunately, in modern society, there is the internet, a highly developed scientific technology.

I moved from the archives to the office and decided to search using the laptop provided there. Although Kyoko Okitegami lives in an old era, the net environment inside the Okitegami Building is surprisingly well maintained—after all, if she doesn't gather at least a basic "common sense of the present age," she couldn't do her job. Even if she is a layman when she wakes up, by dusk she is more adept at using IT technology than I am.

She even has a smartphone. She just doesn't carry it with her.

Ironically, I am the one who does not have a smartphone—in that aspect, it's like a section handling confidential information, using a feature phone without a camera.

The search result revealed the title I wanted immediately. "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie"—apparently, it's the third installment of the "Retired Officer" series.

The third installment...

Even when it's mentioned, it doesn't quite resonate with me... It seems to be a different vein of Hirubei Sunaga from the one I read, a hardboiled series, I gather. Hardboiled, huh... Not exactly my forte.

I sighed.

I guess I have no choice but to read it.

3

Thinking about it, it was a bit hasty to jump at the first gap I found as a clue. Unless I had carefully checked every other bookshelf in the archives from corner to corner to make sure there were no other gaps, I couldn't have definitively concluded that the book she took was undoubtedly "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie"... Otherwise, "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" might simply be a

book that Ms. Kyoko brought into her bedroom as a bedside story. That's not deductive reasoning at all.

But time flows equally for everyone—perhaps, it was possible that a slimmer book was inserted into this slight gap, but only the fastest detective can cover such a slim possibility.

Moreover, having read "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" (a profound title when you think about it), I was convinced that the path I was on was not wrong—although such convictions often turn out to be mistaken, there are also parts where I have to rely on intuition right now.

If there is such a thing as a detective's intuition or a cop's intuition, then a security guard's intuition should also be sharp... By the way, just in case any curious detectives out there might be interested, I should mention in advance that the paradoxical situation of "having to read a book that is lost" was resolved thanks to advanced scientific technology, after all.

I used an e-book.

I didn't know of any bookstore that was open at midnight, and even if there was one, unless it was a big chain, I wouldn't know the stock status. Hirubei Sunaga is a veteran author with a hundred books to his name, so it's not certain that the somewhat older novel "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" would be in stock—worst case, it could be out of print with no scheduled reprints.

Hence the e-book—while Hirubei Sunaga was alive, being a traditional author with particular tastes, he did not permit the digitization of his works, but after his death, the family who inherited his copyrights promptly gave permission, and now, the digitization of his works is steadily progressing, with the "Retired Officer" series included in that category.

It's an episode that somewhat reminds one of Franz Kafka, but then again, Kafka's state of mind when he asked his best friend to "dispose of all his works after his death" might not have been like a playful "You get it, right?", so let's not speculate on that. What's important now is that while still in the building, even in the middle of the night, I was able to purchase the e-book version of "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie."

To facilitate the purchase, I used Ms. Kyoko's standby smartphone. There are no concerns about privacy invasion here. This smartphone contains absolutely no personal information. It doesn't even have a fingerprint registered. In fact, I've been the one acting as the buyer for app purchases—that's why the hurdle for purchasing an e-book was not high.

In the e-bookstore, there are sales from time to time offering points, but I didn't bother with price comparisons and bought from the first bookstore I saw. After all, tonight, I am a millionaire with assets worth two hundred million yen.

So, I have finished reading. With e-books, you can't immediately tell how thick the book is, so I read with bated breath, wondering what if this book was a massive work of fifteen hundred

manuscript pages (though I believed it wouldn't be the case, judging by the spacing). Thanks to skimming, I managed to finish it in about three hours.

As previously mentioned, there were results—no, perhaps I should also express my thoughts on the novel itself since that's expected after reading one, but unfortunately, since I started reading the series in the middle, I wasn't awakened to the excitement of hardboiled fiction. Skimming is a sin.

But leaving that aside, there's the matter of the car.

Even I, who started reading the series in the middle, could understand that the symbol of the "retired officer" protagonist was his classic car—it made me think that perhaps Hirubei Sunaga wanted to depict the allure of this old car more than the mysteries or incidents. Indeed, the cover of the book even featured a photo of the car—perhaps, was there a tie-in of some sort?

Anyway, while I didn't awaken to the charm of hardboiled fiction, I found myself becoming increasingly attracted to the charm of vintage cars.

Not that this is the time for that... but when I rummaged through the library, I had a simple suspicion that the kidnapper might have hooked Ms. Kyoko with the content of the novel, but could it be that the car was the real hook?

When contemplating what the kidnapper must have as tools for the act, one could imagine nefarious things like ropes, handcuffs, blindfolds, masks, and other such props, but an automobile seems like it would be a significant need.

There might be the brute-force method of scooping up the target from above with a helicopter, but when time is short, that possibility doesn't need to be considered (though Ms. Kyoko might consider it).

A car can be said to be a minimal private space. It's a moving sealed room with the victim inside—the question is how the perpetrator would lure the victim into the car. If the criminal used—or rather, misused—this classic car, they could clear that point brilliantly.

Ms. Kyoko might approach willingly, without the need for the kidnapper to call out to her... if they were planning such a trap, they would target the day Ms. Kyoko was reading the "retired officer" series.

The reason why the kidnapping took place today (or rather, yesterday) has become clear—the culprit aimed for the day Ms. Kyoko was reading the "retired officer" series. It doesn't have to be the "I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie"; the "retired officer" series would suffice, and if the goal is something worth over one billion yen, it's not a long-winded story.

The words and knowledge acquired from a newly read book tend to catch the eye immediately after, and such coincidences can make one unexpectedly happy—to the point of mistaking them for fate.

Perhaps that was the chink in one's guard that was exploited.

Ms. Kyoko, with her observant eye, might even chase after a running car—her detective search abilities could be used against her.

Hmm, I couldn't help but groan.

Since I started working, I've been constantly impressed by Ms. Kyoko's efficiency as a detective, but now, inadvertently tracing the thoughts of the criminal side, I've strangely come to admire how much thought they have put into their crime.

I can't help but think that it would have been better if they had used his thinking skills in other areas rather than crime, though such an unsolicited opinion might be frowned upon—it's not as if one should praise it, but indeed, it's an acrobatically clever move.

But then, I consider.

Be it in detective novels or in actual cases, the type of trick that turns the investigative team's conjectures on their head has a downside—it becomes conspicuous once exposed, thereby narrowing down the suspect pool. As Ms. Kyoko once said, at some point, the most difficult crimes to investigate are those that are impromptu, without any premeditation, the mundane crimes of opportunity.

The more exceptional the criminal, the easier they are to identify.

To put it bluntly, the mere fact that "thorough research was conducted" suggests that the perpetrator has been wandering around Ms. Kyoko's vicinity of late—provided that the deduction about the use of a classic car in the crime is correct.

If the speculation is on target, the kidnapper can be identified as the owner of the said classic car—the rarer the make of the classic car, the easier it is to narrow down the owner.

4

It's well into the night, but if I reach out to Officer Hidarui, who has promised some cooperation, I might be able to identify the owner of the car.

I believe it's the Public Safety Commissions of each prefecture that have the authority to issue driver's licenses, but honestly, I'm not well-versed in that area (I have a license but no

experience, having obtained my license when I joined a security company with the intention of guarding armored vehicles, only to be fired before I could put those skills to use).

Before the spread of the Individual Number system and big data, the driver's license was the primary tool for managing personal information—the hypothesis that the perpetrator used a car for the crime presupposes that the criminal possesses a driver's license. It would be ridiculous to get caught for driving without a license before committing the grave sin of kidnapping.

The criminal is smart. There seems to be little benefit in underestimating the enemy, so let's start with that assumption. At the very least, they think themselves as clever as a master detective.

Such a person is likely to correctly judge someone like me, who isn't particularly bright... and assume that if they demanded one billion yen for ransom, I would obediently scramble to arrange the funds (which, in fact, was the case).

Therefore, it's unlikely they ever imagined I'd discover their investment in an old car for the kidnapping—and consequently, I don't think they've forged a license.

The risk of that forgery being discovered is higher than the chance of me uncovering the kidnapping ploy.

For the same reason, I don't believe the criminal used a stolen vehicle... it stands to reason that the perpetrator became the rightful owner of the necessary car through legitimate means.

But from here on out, I'm in the dark—is it possible for the police to identify the owner from the car make? I sincerely wish it was that simple, but honestly, I doubt it's possible.

It doesn't seem to me that there's much significance in managing such information... Wouldn't the automotive industry be more interested in data on how widely different car models are distributed within Japan? The police should be satisfied as long as they have the license plate number—that's why the next piece of information I need is the license plate of the classic car used by the criminal.

Normally, in kidnappings—as with other crimes involving cars—the perpetrators naturally have reasons to hide or switch the license plates. However, when it comes to kidnapping Ms. Kyoko—a master detective—such concealment and deception won't work. It would be impossible for such tricks to go unnoticed by a detective of her caliber.

Whether or not the criminal has grasped this, I recall a "brain teaser" Ms. Kyoko once shared with me, which involved using the numbers on the license plates of passing cars and combining them through the four basic arithmetic operations to continuously create the number "10"—for a detective, paying attention to license plates is perhaps more than just a "brain teaser," it's akin to a necessary discipline for the unforeseen.

So, if they had attempted any clumsy–or even clever–tricks, there'd have been a risk that Ms. Kyoko might become suspicious. The plan requires her to approach the car on her own, so the vehicle must not look out of place.

It would normally be a dangerously risky gamble, but since the target is the forgetful detective, there's no problem in exposing license plates, or even showing one's face, for that matter.

Once their objective (something other than money) is achieved, and after releasing Ms. Kyoko, she won't even remember being kidnapped, let alone how it happened–from what I've seen so far, it seems the kidnapper has been concentrating on minimizing future risks once the crime is successful.

They haven't given much thought to the possibility of being tripped up. And that's the weakness.

Specifically... by focusing solely on observing Ms. Kyoko, the kidnapper may not have thoroughly considered that they themselves could be under surveillance. Indeed, such conjecture alone will not pinpoint the criminal–it's difficult to immediately identify the owner of a vintage car while sitting at home.

But what if?

If the kidnapper used a rare vintage car to abduct Ms. Kyoko, wouldn't other people, not just readers of Hirubei Sunaga, take notice of such a distinctive vehicle? Has the criminal taken measures to avoid the unintended attraction of car enthusiasts' attention?

I have a feeling they haven't. Or rather, that they couldn't.

Instead of gathering information on a wanted criminal, we should gather sightings of the vintage car–if I were in charge of the investigation, I'd initiate a thorough sweep operation immediately, but in reality, I can't even assemble a task force.

Here's where the internet comes into play again. If the car is rarer than a celebrity, the likelihood of sighting information being spread online is extremely high–it's completely unsafe from a privacy standpoint, but people are probably mentioning rare cars they spot around town anyway. What we need is, if possible, live commentary. It would be perfect if someone uploaded a photo taken with their smartphone. The culprit might be in it.

By the way, as a trial, before starting this futile search, I also tried collecting sightings of a white-haired, glasses-wearing stylish person on the internet–but no such individual turned up.

What is protecting this person?

It seems that didn't go as far as to protect her from the kidnapper... or at that point, is it a matter of having to fend for oneself?

Well, if solving the case were that easy, there would be no need for detectives or police... The same goes for searching for witnesses of the vintage car.

I almost had to take a moment to question why I must engage in such cyber-investigative activities... It's not that I can't find any information. On the contrary, there's too much to handle.

Is the car not as rare as I thought? No, it's just that many cars with a similar design from that era have been released... There must have been a type that became a trend. There are numerous misidentifications of different cars as the one in question.

This is bad. I only needed to gather local gossip within the town, but the internet brings in information from all over the world. For someone quick-witted like Ms. Kyoko or a resourceful police agency, it might be manageable, but for my personal information processing ability, sorting through the vast amount of sighting information will likely take all night.

Drowning in a sea of web surfing, I feel as bloated as if I've swallowed a bellyful of seawater. My mind is overflowing.

At this point, I even started to think that it might be better to just sleep once and rethink the strategy plan from scratch with a refreshed mind (or as they say, "throw in the towel"), but at this very moment, as I am doing this, Ms. Kyoko, who is captive, must be sitting tight, fighting off sleep, and attempting to escape on her own, and with that thought, I spur myself on.

Well, to be honest, if you were to ask whether Ms. Kyoko, who spent her time in the police station's detention center so defiantly, is staying awake without budging in the kidnapper's confinement space, I can hardly imagine that's the case... But when I think that while the forgetful detective is comfortably playing Sleeping Beauty, I am staying up all night doing research unlike what I'm used to, my heart feels like it is going to break, so I decided to think as little as possible about that matter.

Instead, I thought about something else.

Even if I say I will follow the style of the forgetful detective, it's not necessary for me to be like Ms. Kyoko. As you can see from my incompetence so far, covering all possibilities and making selections—doing hard work speedily—is, after all, definitely not my job, no matter how you think about it.

Time flows equally for everyone, but at the same time, it's relative—Ms. Kyoko only has today. For Ms. Kyoko, every day is "the last day of her life." The approach to the same twenty-four hours is completely different. To the psychological test question, "If humanity is going to perish

tomorrow, what do you want to do?" she would answer, "I'll rack my brain and save humanity within today," such an awe-inspiring heroic temperament.

I can't imitate that. I realized it painfully when I tried.

Faced with the great cause of rescuing a kidnapped hostage (leaving aside if I can actually pull it off), one tends to fall into the delusion that they must do everything they can, do everything they should do, or else they are being negligent—no, it's not a delusion, it probably is indeed the case.

But rather than running out of time trying to solve all one hundred problems, if you can securely solve the twenty that you can, then you can score twenty points, right? And among those twenty questions, there might be one worth fifty points—no, this analogy isn't apt.

It's easier to understand with a lottery analogy. If there is one winning ticket among a hundred, you will definitely win if you draw a hundred times—this would be Ms. Kyoko's method. If I can only draw twenty, then I should just draw those twenty.

I might win with them. One in five is not a bad probability at all. No, in such a situation, even one in a hundred is a very reassuring probability.

I should narrow the range.

It's okay not to do a strict selection, and I'd rather not do a detailed analysis. I'll just gather the information that I can judge without a doubt is absolutely correct. Drastically cut out the "might be" information and the information where "reasonable doubt remains."

The famous saying, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," is hard to hear, but I, who am no famous detective, will gather possibilities that can only be seen as the truth.

Let's dance around the online information that is neither "looks like that" or "seems that way," but is "that's all I can think of."

It is possible to assume that the kidnapper used a classic car to kidnap Ms. Kyoko, but it is unlikely that they used the same car when they were doing their preliminary stalking, right? If they came before they were ready—well, that's fine too, because by the next day, Ms. Kyoko will have forgotten it. Rather, it's a good test. Initially, I thought to narrow down to the eyewitness information for about these twenty-four hours and start collecting information again, but then, let's narrow it down to about this last month. If I set too many conditions for narrowing down, the search results will be zero.

The past month. Around Okitegami Building. With photos that clearly identify the car model, including the era, and if not the driver, at least the license plate is captured.

How about that?

From a search that felt like cutting corners, the results yielded four hits. Of those, two were duplicates, so in other words, I found (and could be certain of) three license plates.

The license plates attached to the said vintage cars... unfortunately, whether it's due to the angle or maybe because the windows are tinted with a smoked film, the driver's figure is not visible in any of the photos.

But with this, I should be able to confirm the owner's identity... If I can confirm the identity, I might be able to trace the driver's license from that name... Three drivers... Three suspects...

Good.

What's good, you ask? That I've noticed something they haven't noticed, which is the best part of all.

Now, time to call Officer Hidarui. It's deep into the night, but unlike Ms. Kyoko, for some reason, I'm more certain that he'll be pulling an all-nighter than I am about the license plates.

5

After committing the terrible deed of labeling at least two-thirds of the innocent drivers as potential criminals based on internet information—a misdeed that should not be done—time passed, and then the third threatening call from the kidnapper came through.

"Hello?"

第五話　青の脱出劇

Ch 5: The Blue Escape Play

1

The second plan I, the kidnapper, devised to salvage the confidential information forgotten by the forgetful detective was to declare, in a manner befitting the final boss of a video game, "Solve this mystery, and I'll let you go home"—however, I couldn't discard this plan, which was clearly dragged down by Plan A.

To try to recover from a failure is to simply repeat it—rather than trying to regain what was lost, it must be completely reset.

In that regard, I should take a leaf out of the forgetful detective's book.

After all, Ms. Kyoko might agree to a deal, but I can't imagine she would respond to a threat. This isn't based on observation, but rather the impression I got from actually speaking with her. Her professional awareness as a detective is far greater than expected... She clings strongly to being a detective.

Then, that is what I should take advantage of next.

What does a detective desire? A complicated case. An enticing mystery.

And then there's the client.

I'll pretend to be a client—and request the resolution of a case. Not as a quiz, but as an actual incident that occurred... In other words, I will pose as a party involved in an "incident" and make a request to Ms. Kyoko.

For that, I must first release Ms. Kyoko from her restraints. Take her off the armchair and lay her down in a bed. It's not strange at all for me, the client, to explain the outline of the request to the forgetful detective who fell asleep amidst the case.

As for releasing her from restraints, how should I explain the captivity? I certainly can't let her out of this room. The risk is too great.

Perhaps I'll say it's a panic room she fled into while being pursued by the criminal... It should be easier for a master detective to accept than if I simply explained she fell asleep during the case. I must preserve her pride. To be a client who can build a trustworthy relationship, I want to avoid being contradicted with "It's impossible for me to carelessly fall asleep during a case."

Fortunately, I am the criminal, and I actually made Ms. Kyoko fall asleep in the car, so I think I can tell a convincing lie. It's almost as good as the truth.

However, this means I can't reuse the first three quizzes I gave her. None of those three cases include a thrilling adventure where the criminal strikes back violently or where the client hides in an evacuation space.

But I have a plethora of cases on hand that are believed to involve the forgetful detective—though they'll need to be arranged, there should be no shortage of cases that can be disguised or camouflaged.

What's important here is that the plan can be applied to the case that contains the confidential information I most desire, the prime target—that's precisely why I came up with the idea. Of course, I'm not foolish enough to try it out immediately. Even if I fail, Ms. Kyoko's memory should reset, but I want to test it thoroughly with all due diligence.

It's what you'd call a beta test.

After all, this is an attempt to draw out lost memories from the forgetful detective... It's risky to place too much hope in the reset. Even if she doesn't remember with her head, her body might remember... Having already failed once, I must proceed without letting my guard down.

Once I've decided, I must act quickly. There are a myriad of preparations to be done before Ms. Kyoko wakes up.

I am facing the fastest detective.

I must become the fastest criminal.

2

To put it simply, Plan B failed. The beta test of Plan B failed. It was an even more catastrophic failure than Plan A—the fastest failure. Everything was on the brink of collapse; it would have been so if I hadn't taken preemptive measures.

But let's go through it step by step.

I had transferred Ms. Kyoko from the armchair to the bed, waiting for her to awaken—no, if I were to follow the procedure, there was one thing that had taken place in between. I had changed Ms. Kyoko's clothes. Accused of having poor taste in a roundabout way, I couldn't stay quiet. I have my pride, too. No, it's not just a matter of pride.

If Ms. Kyoko were to wake and think, “I would never dress myself in such unfashionable clothes,” then my Plan B—dubbed the 'Client Plan'—would be ruined at that moment.

“The criminal drugged you to sleep” is still somewhat acceptable, but “the criminal forced you to change your clothes” is too close to the truth—if so, I considered changing her back into her original outfit, but that was also problematic.

Ms. Kyoko, despite her condition of memory resetting daily, is rumored never to wear the same outfit twice... a rumor substantiated by meticulous observation. I don't understand the mechanism, but given that, it felt exceedingly risky to have her redress in the same clothes after the date had already changed.

Perhaps there's a rule known only to her or maybe a system in place... whatever it is, I want no part in triggering such a frightening thing.

All I want is confidential information.

I have no desire whatsoever to become a fashion leader in the criminal world... nor to become a criminal myself, as this kidnapping will be reset.

And so, before laying Ms. Kyoko down, I took the step of redressing the great detective in my own taste. It's an extravagant notion when you think about it—turning a fashion-conscious detective into a dress-up doll. Considering the magnitude of the risk I'm taking, it's hardly a rewarding task.

Now then.

Considering she's at work, short sleeves seem inappropriate. Ms. Kyoko tends to cover up more while working... not for the sake of etiquette, but to hide her “memos”—it's for securing space for secret notes that long sleeves are preferable. And for the lower half, a skirt is better than pants... otherwise, she'd have to expose her panties every time she checks her notes. Although, flipping up a skirt is hardly considered elegant either—but I decided to build around that concept.

Since the orange shirt was apparently not well-received, I prepared something like a pale blue puff-sleeve blouse for this time. A long blue skirt of maxi length to match, creating a gradient—this kind of effort is what fashion is about, isn't it?

Thankfully, there was a silver lining.

During the first “dress-up,” the shoes I chose were strongly criticized—but this time, she would be waking up on top of the bed. That means I can leave the shoes off. If I can circumvent the initial intuitive impression, a slight mismatch with the shoes arranged beside the bed might be forgivable. I lined up some functional sneakers, befitting a detective.

However, there are limits to the patterns available with the items I had prepared in advance. It's hard to say I was satisfied with the final look. Far from a pleasant time, it was not enjoyable at all—but still, I persevered. After becoming utterly exhausted from the ordeal (not just mentally; changing a sleeping person's clothes twice in a short span is physically draining), I moved Ms. Kyoko to the bed—then, instead of my own chair, I sat down in the armchair, utterly drained, or rather, relaxed, and waited for the sleeping beauty to awaken.

I waited, pondering what a peculiar use of time this was.

I consoled myself thinking that, compared to the security guard who must be frantically gathering an unobtainable ransom, I was making better use of my time. Or perhaps he's already contacted the police by now, being dismissed and at his wit's end?

I've done him wrong.

What must it feel like, to possess the capability to muster two hundred million yen, yet still fall short, not be believed by anyone, and not have a single ally?

In the midst of such ponderous thoughts, "Mmhmm..." Ms. Kyoko awoke.

Quicker than I could brace myself for her sudden awakening, even before sitting up fully, Ms. Kyoko rolled up her left sleeve—it seemed her body remembered. Half-asleep, she checked her handwritten memo—"I am Kyoko Okitegami. White hair. Glasses. Twenty-five years old. Head of the Okitegami Detective Agency. A detective whose memory resets every day."

That act of recognition signaled the start of the performance.

"Have you come to, Ms. Kyoko? Do you recognize me, how much do you remember!? I am your client—"

But I, not one used to acting, couldn't finish telling my improvised, fact-based fiction.

"67 points!"

Ms. Kyoko exclaimed as she delivered a splendid kick to my neck—it must've been easier since she was wearing a skirt. I caught a glimpse of her thighs and underwear, an aside, but it was a good thing she wasn't wearing shoes. Had she been in high heels, it might have been the end of me, given the ferocity of the kick.

It wasn't Baritsu, but her movement was nimble indeed—evident not just in her kicking me down but in her actions afterward.

Perhaps using the bed's springs, Ms. Kyoko jumped up as if bouncing, landing on the floor with the grace of a gymnast. Without a glance at me, she dashed off without a sound, her white hair fluttering.

Towards the exit.

"Ah...!"

I realized. The 67 points were perplexing, but it seemed to pertain to my fashion coordination—I didn't know what score I had before, but it felt like a drop from the passing mark of the previous occasion. Had I tried too hard?

And then, silly me, I noticed something else.

Ms. Kyoko had never been asleep.

She had been feigning sleep the entire time—for hours, without giving it away. Without stirring, she endured, feigning peaceful slumber... what sort of patience was that?

So, her memory hadn't been reset... she remembered everything. That I was the kidnapper, that I was trying to extract confidential information under the guise of a game. But why act now? She could have continued pretending to sleep, or even attempted to flee earlier.

The answer came quickly—as I tried to stand to catch Ms. Kyoko before she reached the exit, my legs got tangled.

It seemed Ms. Kyoko had been waiting for me to "get tired"—from the strenuous task of changing her clothes while she "slept," which had exhausted me. I couldn't imagine she had anticipated the clothes change—but had she? Had she indirectly, provocatively dismissed my fashion sense to provoke me?

Perhaps I was overthinking it.

Even if I hadn't become stubborn and sought revenge for the fashion check, watching over Ms. Kyoko throughout the night would surely lead to fatigue—she waited for that moment like a hunter, without even opening her eyes slightly.

And as long as I was in the room, the door wasn't locked—technically, it was locked from the inside, but that would only delay someone for a second at most.

Having untangled my legs, I managed to stand, but by then, Ms. Kyoko's figure had vanished from the room—the fastest detective.

Swift to flee, merciless.

That was the sad demise of Plan B—thinking back, it was filled with unbelievable blunders of my own making.

With a sigh, I drag my feet toward the open door—emotionally, I feel like I could stand frozen forever, letting the shock seep through my entire body, but that's not an option. If I dawdle, there's the worry that I might end up trapped, but more importantly.

More importantly, I am worried about Ms. Kyoko.

Well, just because she dashed out of the room and realized there was no escape, I don't think she's the type to despair and throw herself into the sea—but there is always the chance of "what if she does."

As I step outside, indeed, the forgetful detective was.

Beyond the metallic clang of the deck, at the bow of the ship, she was looking up at the sky, "..."

3

Deciding where to confine Ms. Kyoko was a challenge totally different from preliminary research—it's hard to imagine her, an active and renowned detective, passively submitting to captivity.

If restrained tightly enough that not even a finger could be moved, escape would indeed be impossible unless she were a magician, but as I've said repeatedly, that's not what I desire... I plan to release her unharmed, so resorting to violence is out of the question.

At the very least, to a minimum.

So after much thought, I concluded that confining her at sea was the way to go... My initial grand idea was to detain her in a submarine. The mere thought of it was thrilling, but it was obviously infeasible... A submarine, after all, can't be bought for one billion yen, and even if it could be bought, piloting it would be impossible. It's not just a matter of lifting restrictions, what kind of license would one even need?

So I settled for a boat.

A second-hand yacht was an investment that seemed reasonable... or rather, to be honest, it was cheaper than the old car used for the kidnapping tool. Obtaining a boating license was personally easier, especially compared to a submarine license.

In the end, both the old car and the yacht were meant to be resold, so I think of it as a sort of temporary debt... The boat is moored far from land, and the transit to and from the mainland is by rubber dinghy.

Remove the engine key and, incidentally, deflate the rubber dinghy, and the ship becomes an isolated island in the middle of the sea.

Ms. Kyoko absolutely cannot escape.

It's, so to speak, a cage on the blue sea.

That said, the fact that this is a boat was supposed to be kept a secret throughout. That's why I remodeled the room and prepared a swaying, comfortable armchair... The engine key is properly removed, but still, depending on the weather, there might be some movement.

"Ms. Kyoko, please return to your room. It's dangerous to stand out there; if you fall into the sea, it would be troubling."

It's not a distance one can swim back from.

Looking around in all directions, land is nowhere in sight... It's still dark, which is part of the reason, but even on a clear day, at best one might see a small island near the horizon.

"...I could just knock you out and take the engine key for the yacht or boat, you know."

She said.

Ms. Kyoko turned around and said something rather threatening—but the way she extended her arm and posed her palm didn't quite look convincing, as if she had no knowledge of martial arts. That kick was probably just beginner's luck.

It's a revelation that not every master detective possesses the skill of Baritsu.

"It seems quicker to make a deal with you, kidnapper. Very well, I acknowledge you as my adversary with this large-scale scheme."

She was smiling.

A smile that seemed to blow away all fatigue.

Ms. Kyoko, having returned to the modified cabin that served as her prison, was eerily quiet. Quieter than quiet, it was unnerving; no sooner had she sat in the armchair than she said,

"Please, tie me up again."

"Surrounded by the sea on all sides, whether I'm bound or not, it's all the same. And I don't want to be thought of as an accomplice, so I prefer to maintain my status as a captive."

Hmm, I see.

The development was the complete opposite of the planned Stockholm syndrome, but it could be said that this positioned us as equals—a negotiation, then.

I'm not a mystery fanatic who would get carried away just by being recognized as an adversary by a famous detective, but the conversation did become easier to advance.

However, there was a request from Ms. Kyoko, who is now a captive—she had a complaint about the way she was being treated as a prisoner.

She glanced at the sneakers lined up beside the bed and said,

"Could you at least prepare a different pair of shoes for me? I cannot tolerate this flaw."

I was so disheartened by the thought of scoring lower than 67 points that I couldn't find it in me to argue... Resigned, I laid out all the shoes I had prepared in advance, other than the sneakers, in front of the armchair where she sat.

What Ms. Kyoko chose were lace-up sandals... I hate to say it, but they didn't seem particularly stylish. I had bought them on a whim, thinking they had a certain charm, but as I questioned that decision, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

"Ms. Kyoko, did you perhaps injure your foot?"

It was when she had kicked me in the nape of my neck—while the pain had subsided for me, and I was more concerned about my wrist, which I had hurt when I fell to the floor, it's true that both the striker and the struck can suffer damage from a blow. Especially the delicate Ms. Kyoko. Could she have twisted her foot in a weird way when she kicked me barefoot? And that's why she's choosing the lace-up sandals, which seem comfortable?

"*Giggle*. Such a kind kidnapper you are, to worry about my ankle after I kicked you so hard."

Ms. Kyoko teased me.

It's awkward to be described as kind when that's far from my intentions... While it's true I was concerned, my worry was that if her ankle swelled up, there would be a trace left even after Ms. Kyoko's memory was reset.

It wasn't purely out of concern for Ms. Kyoko's wellbeing... No, that's not right. Why let a sense of guilt take root? This is a trap.

"Don't worry, look, it's perfectly fine, isn't it?"

Still seated in the armchair, Ms. Kyoko moved her ankle about, demonstrating its flexibility. The movement was smooth and unimpeded, clearly showing no visible damage.

"So, may I wear the sandals I chose? As you can see, I'm restrained."

If I thought she was Sleeping Beauty before, now she's in a Cinderella mood? I felt completely led by the detective's pace, but that was fine too.

If my objective is met, there's no need for me to win.

I knelt down at her feet and slipped the lace-up sandals on her—since I had already checked, they should fit perfectly.

How does one even find out shoe size? To answer that question, I had checked her shoe locker when Ms. Kyoko dined at a Japanese restaurant where you remove your shoes... Ah, of course with her consent. Even if I hadn't touched the ten-thousand-yen note hidden in her shoes, it's a perverse act, more dangerous and criminal than anything else.

But it served its purpose.

As a result, the moment Ms. Kyoko put on the lace-up sandals, they began to shine with an unprecedented brightness—strictly speaking, it wasn't the sandals, but the total coordination of her outfit that came together beautifully.

Are shoes really that important?

Apparently, Ms. Kyoko didn't choose the shoes out of consideration for me, but rather she selected them with her incomparable sense, which I couldn't even begin to understand—what am I to do, being haunted with a sense of defeat rather than guilt?

Well, it's a relief that she wasn't injured.

"And so, Ms. Kyoko. Earlier you mentioned a deal—how far are you willing to compromise?"

"Compromise?"

"Yes. You must understand my objective by now?"

"It seems unlikely to be money. Not for you, "Captain One Billion Yen", over here. Though for me, it's hard to believe you'd want something other than money."

As you'd expect from the forgetful detective known as a "slave to money"... The way she addresses me as "Captain One Billion Yen" only reinforces the notion.

And indeed, since she remembers the ransom demand, it seems that Ms. Kyoko hasn't slept a wink since she first woke up in this room.

That means she also remembers the three quizzes—the "workbook" on her lap.

"From what I gather, what you desire is information, isn't it? You want the confidential details of the cases I solved as the Forgetful Detective..."

"In this day and age, information is power."

"This day and age," might not resonate with Ms. Kyoko... So I decided to elaborate.

"In the modern world, data itself is like a detective. Collected statistical information weaves personal profiles just as if it's decoding DNA. That's why there's a simultaneous outcry for both the disclosure and protection of information—amidst such a world, the existence of an Forgetful Detective like you is extremely valuable. Or rather, a hot commodity."

"So, you're saying you want to monopolize the outlines of difficult cases and impossible crimes, the hidden truths and tricks?"

Tricks don't matter to me... I thought, but they might be useful after all. Criminal methods not yet publicized could have a certain demand in the market of villains.

"That's correct."

I omitted the details and simply nodded. Even though a negotiation was starting on equal grounds, I didn't intend to lay everything bare.

"If you disclose the information I desire, I promise to immediately send you back to land, Ms. Kyoko. Of course, I'll reset your memory, and you'll forget about me."

"That would be appreciated. But if that's the case, I'm afraid I can't be of much help."

Ms. Kyoko said this calmly, yet with finality.

"There's professional ethics as a detective to consider, but even before that, I am the 'Forgetful Detective,' whose memory resets with each sleep."

Ms. Kyoko recited this, as if reading from the memo on her left arm, now hidden by her sleeve.

"I don't remember the details of any case. If there was a way to extract past memories from me, I would be more than happy to cooperate—I'm not entirely disinterested in my hidden past, after all."

"..."

How serious is she? Honestly, based on her behavior observed from a distance, she didn't seem eager to discover her true identity—normally, if someone loses their memory, they'd try to regain it. But her actions on her days off consistently resembled someone "good at killing time."

She hadn't once tried to trace her own footsteps... It seems neither side intends to reveal everything.

It's a game of deception.

"The quizzes were meant for that, you know. Even if they've been erased from your memory, they're mysteries you've once solved, cases you've resolved. If you read the summary of the proceedings, couldn't you deduce the same answers, the same culprits, the same truths?"

"I'm not denying the idea itself. It's well thought out. But... here's something crucial, so listen carefully, okay? If you ask whether I was able to solve those three quizzes that were given to me, the answer is: not at all."

"What?"

"The 'Sarashina Research Institute's Confidential Data Theft Case,' the 'Atelier House Case,' the 'Dismemberment Murder of the Unemployed Male (37)'—were those it? No, I've completely forgotten them. From your words and actions, I was able to deduce that these are cases I've solved in the past, but as for the crucial details... Oh, but for the first question, I think it's probably that shady guy named Yakusuke Kakushidate that's the culprit."

How serious is this—how true is it?

I had thought that after answering those three questions, she had slept and reset, but not only was the reset fake, but the premise that the problems were solved was also a misunderstanding on my part?

I would like to strongly urge that there is no such thing as a problem that can be solved once and not the second time-but I thought that it could happen, which is why I gave her the opportunity to test herself before the real thing, didn't I?

If I recall the exams from my student days, there were times when I could solve the problems during the last-minute study at home, but then I was completely stuck during the actual exam... Not that I can compare my report cards to the casebook of a forgetful detective, but it's possible that there was a flaw in the problem statement itself.

It's not a police report, but a file I created independently. There is a limit to its accuracy and the amount of information.

Even if that's not the case, reading on paper and actually conducting detective work on-site are entirely different matters... I needed to know this disparity, which is why I tried to perform a triple check with three patterns, but I didn't anticipate getting all questions wrong without any answers.

I know that things don't always go as planned, but not being able to visualize the worst-case scenario is a bad habit of mine... my worst habit. Nevertheless, the possibility that everything is just Ms. Kyoko's bluff is, for now, the most likely truth.

Bluffing is usually about claiming you can do something you can't, but this case is the opposite—claiming you can't do something you can do, saying you can't solve a mystery that is solvable.

"Goodness, I'd be more than willing to cooperate with you, the kidnapper, but there are things humans can and cannot do. It's quite troubling when I'm asked for information beyond my capabilities."

The trouble is on her side.

It would have been easier if instead she had declared, "I cannot betray a client, for the honor of a forgetful detective! I will protect confidentiality no matter what, even at the cost of my life!"

This kidnapper who demanded a ransom of one billion yen from the security guard at the Okitegami Detective Agency did so to ensure that no ransom would be paid—but making demands beyond Ms. Kyoko's capabilities is pointless.

Knowing that, Ms. Kyoko is saying just that—it's beyond her capabilities.

To refute such an argument, does it mean I have to prove that Ms. Kyoko, who says she can't do something, can actually do it if she tries... Why do I have to act like some overly helpful home tutor?

Maybe it would be better to carelessly let her solve the mystery without her noticing... But then, Ms. Kyoko, a professional detective, is not the type who won't leave an intriguing mystery unsolved.

Even if the situation is not like this, this detective also has a businesslike side that might say she won't solve a mystery she could solve if she doesn't get paid for her services.

So, should I lure her with money?

It's unheard of for a kidnapper to pay money to a hostage, but if that resolves the issue... However, I've spent almost all of my money acquiring old cars and boats. I'm flat broke.

I'm reminded of the two hundred million yen that the security guard at Okitegami Building unexpectedly prepared... It's just too convenient—as if it was planned... No, I can't rely on that. It's common knowledge that the moment of receiving ransom money is the most dangerous for a kidnapper, even for a non-criminal.

Furthermore, a ransom of two hundred million yen would barely prompt the police to act... It’s only because the demanded amount was a comically large one billion yen that one could predict the threatening call might be dismissed as a prank call.

After all, however money-minded a famous detective may be, it’s hard to imagine that the forgetful detective would sell her duty of confidentiality for cash—as I was racked with such thoughts, Ms. Kyoko offered what seemed like assistance.

"It is truly regrettable. If I had been in top form, maybe I could have solved it."

No, that might not have been a lifeline, but rather a lead weight.

"It's only natural to feel out of sorts when you're dressed in such a unique outfit—"

5

Then, as the day broke, I made a third threatening call to the Okitegami Detective Agency. Now that it's come to this, I can't leave Ms. Kyoko's side, so this time the call isn't from a payphone, but from aboard a ship.

"Hello?"

第六話　藍（あい）の取引

Ch 6: The Indigo Deal

1

I had given up on playing the part of an intelligent criminal who uses public payphones across prefectural borders to make threatening calls. However, just because I can't afford to leave Ms. Kyoko's side doesn't mean I'm foolish enough to call the Okitegami Building from my personal cell phone while on a boat.

To be precise, I did use a cell phone—a smartphone, to be exact—although I didn't use the phone line.

No matter how strictly the Okitegami Detective Agency upholds its confidentiality policy, it's almost impossible to be optimistic that they don't employ caller ID or call tracing systems even under these circumstances.

While I was confident that there would likely be no problems, I had learned through my exchanges with the forgetful detective that one should always plan for the worst-case scenario. So instead of using the phone line, I made the call using data transmission—an IP call, I suppose? It's that thing where you route the call through multiple overseas servers to obscure the origin.

To confess like a true criminal, I admit I don't fully understand how this system conceals the origin of the call. Why does routing through overseas servers make the origin unclear? I have a rough idea—it's probably the same principle as when a call from abroad shows up as "unknown" on the caller ID—but the true mechanism remains a mystery to me. I just followed the manual.

In the first place, this act is one of extreme caution.

More than that, I am grateful for the cellular company's efforts, which allow me to have signal far enough offshore that no land is in sight. In order to improve the communication environment, I had to step outside the confinement room (not forgetting to bolt it) and make the call from the deck, which was not exactly at a comfortable temperature. But since there are things I wouldn't want Ms. Kyoko to hear, this was actually quite convenient. Should I be arrested, I shall keep the carrier used for the crime a secret, as a matter of honor.

"Hello?" "Hello?"

We both began simultaneously—as one would expect, the security guard at the Okitegami Building seemed to have been eagerly awaiting my call. It's quite a strange feeling to be eagerly awaiting a threatening call...

Was his name Mamoru Oyagiri?

He was Ms. Kyoko's partner during the "Atelier House Case"... That alone wouldn't make him particularly noteworthy.

Whether it's a client, someone involved in a case, or a police officer, it's not uncommon for Ms. Kyoko to team up with someone to solve a case.

However, in the case of Mamoru Oyagiri, the fact that he became an employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency after the incident is indeed noteworthy.

An assistant to a famous detective—a different dynamic than that of Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson, but still, the forgetful detective who continues to reset independently and avoids forming connections has chosen only him to hire, and not only that, but also to live in the office, surely there must be something special about him.

He's a so-called "something else."

That’s also why I set up the time-consuming demand for one billion-yen ransom, but it seems he's no ordinary person, as he managed to come up with two hundred million yen, although not the full amount. It's unlikely, but maybe, in this brief period, he has managed to gather eight hundred million yen more... In that case, how should I respond? Should I attempt to raise the ransom as I had foreshadowed in the previous call?

No, the situation has already changed dramatically... I have to convey the result of the negotiation with Ms. Kyoko to the security guard—that's how I was organizing the newly constructed train of thought in my head, delaying my next line through the voice changer.

I let him take the initiative.

"Is this Ms. Takako Takanaka?"

The noteworthy security guard said.

He called my name—he hadn't gathered eight hundred million yen.

Mamoru Oyagiri had figured out the name of the criminal.

2

I haven't necessarily deduced the name of the criminal... at best, I'm about one-third of the way there, and to be more equitable, the odds are even less favorable. Should it be called the "truth

rate"? At least I've earned a partial score of ten points. Because among the three license plates I found through an internet search, it's not guaranteed that one belongs to the kidnapper.

However, given the reaction on the other end of the phone, it seems luck might be on my side, and I heaved a sigh of relief—well, if I may say so, it wasn't just luck. I did follow a certain procedure.

Despite it being the middle of the night, Officer Hidarui kindly complied with my request. To be honest, he wasn't exactly willing... "This sort of task isn't really my responsibility," or "Strictly speaking, this act is illegal," he grumbled and muttered under his breath, checking the owners of the license plates with a mix of complaints.

But through his begrudging words, I could discern that he was somewhat concerned for Ms. Kyoko's safety... yet I wasn't so oblivious as to point that out in detail and spoil his mood.

Then, the three names he provided—the names of the three suspects—were as follows:

"Kaoru Kuji"

"Takako Takanaka"

"Denzo Honno"

...Knowing that much, surely Officer Hidarui must also have access to other registered data such as addresses, ages, birthdates, and even criminal records, but he didn't share any personal information beyond the names.

Naturally.

Even a bad cop has lines they can't cross... At this point, the "False Accusations Factory" has already done quite a bit of overstepping.

I promised to report the progress properly (and I was also made to promise not to do anything rash... I consider myself pretty prudent, but do I seem like such a reckless type? Certainly, working at the "Okitegami Detective Agency" means leading a rather unconventional life), and with that, I said "good night," bowed to the interlocutor even if he couldn't see me, and hung up the phone.

And then it was time for deduction. It was like playing detective.

I had the much-desired names of the suspects, but with just that, it was hardly different from when I got the license plate numbers—at least from my perspective.

If they had more unique names—like, say, Mr. Yakusuke Kakushidate—then an unsavory investigation through internet searches, gathering personal information, would be possible. But all three had very common names that would likely yield ten thousand hits each if searched online.

How does increasing the suspects from three to thirty thousand help?

However, unlike the impersonal sequence of numbers on a license plate, people's names have meaning—intentions from their parents, grandparents, or ancestors. Of course, I'm not desperate enough to determine the culprit by the origins of their names—I wouldn't identify a criminal based on that, not yet. But even without any knowledge of divination, there was one thing that was certain.

Among the three suspects, "Takako Takanaka" was a woman—it's unusual, unless a family is exceptionally progressive, to name a baby boy ending with "-ko." While it's hard to assert gender with a name like "Mamoru Oyagiri," with "Kyoko Okitegami," one can almost certainly conclude it's a woman's name—so it's safe to assume "Takako Takanaka" is female.

Similarly, "Denzo Honno" would be a man. "Kaoru Kuji" is, like me, gender-ambiguous based on the name alone...

One man, one woman, and one of unknown gender.

Certainly more distinctive than license plate numbers.

Initially, I somehow speculated that the criminal was either "Kaoru Kuji" or "Denzo Honno"—kidnapping, a heinous crime, must involve some degree of violence, I thought, and wouldn't it require physical strength?

But such a notion was merely a hunch.

There are female kidnappers.

I should consider this with gender equality in mind—then, I suddenly realized.

No, on the contrary, wouldn't Ms. Kyoko be easier to kidnap if the criminal was a woman?

Indeed, if Ms. Kyoko were to spot the classic car from her favorite detective novel during a stroll, she might race to it without hesitation, utterly losing her reason. But would she be so carried away as to blithely hop into the passenger seat of a strange man's car?

She might get carried away. That's something she could do—but there should be moments when she wouldn't.

What if the driver were a woman? Her guard would be lowered by half... well, not necessarily halved, but it would seem somewhat diminished.

Yes, that seems likely.

Or rather, it would be nice if that were the case.

If the culprit were a woman, it would save the trouble of having to tediously differentiate the three suspects from different angles—you could pinpoint the culprit in one shot. That's an overstatement, though, since there's the existence of "Kaoru Kuji"... with just the name, it's impossible to tell the gender.

I searched the gender ratio of the name "Kaoru" just in case, but as expected, no such statistics came up at a glance—so let's simply think of it as 1:1.

Firmly believing in Ms. Kyoko's integrity, I conclude that the culprit is a woman. At this point, I can exclude "Denzo Honno" from the suspects... leaving "Kaoru Kuji" and "Takako Takanaka". "Kaoru Kuji" has a fifty-fifty chance of being male or female—Takako Takanaka, on the other hand, is assumed to be one hundred percent likely to be a woman.

So, um... it's math. After all the talk of possibilities and probabilities, even those not in the sciences should be able to calculate these odds.

If the culprit is a woman, "Kaoru Kuji" has a one in four chance of being the culprit, "Takako Takanaka" has a two in four (one-half) chance.

Intuitively, there doesn't seem to be much difference between one-fourth and one-half. With my unreliable luck in drawing lots, I'm likely to miss the mark either way—after all, I might have already missed it at the initial fifty-fifty (male-female) stage.

First and foremost, this guesswork includes a lot of wishful thinking on my part... I'm naively hoping that if the kidnapper is a woman, Ms. Kyoko is less likely to be in danger than if the kidnapper were a man.

Such hopes usually cloud a detective's judgment—it's proof that I'm not a detective. But whether I'm a detective or not, there's still a double difference between one-fourth and one-half—if I had to bet, I definitely should bet on "Takako Takanaka".

I had no choice but to bet.

Not just because the correct answer rate is higher, but because otherwise, my chances of rescuing Ms. Kyoko would be nearly gone.

"Is this Ms. Takako Takanaka?"

I was drenched in cold sweat when I broached the topic during the threatening phone call—thank goodness it wasn't a video call. No, if it had been a video call, I would have known the gender of the kidnapper, and even their face, from the first call—but even without the video call, I could tell that the kidnapper had lost their words on the other end of the receiver.

"How—"

As I watched for their reaction, the kidnapper—Takako Takanaka—started to say something, then stopped.

Rather than having started to say, it seemed more like they had started to ask, "How did you know?"

But the kidnapper knew all too well that I would not answer such a question. To assume the role of the questioner is to give the threatening party an opening—a sign of weakness.

It's often said in Japan, "Asking is a shame for a moment, not asking is a shame for life," but that's for the classroom or workplace—it's not a proverb that applies to exchanges between kidnappers and detective agencies. Well, even if I were an unusually honest person, I wouldn't answer such a question with "It was almost a wild guess"...

Anyway, if they can't come up with a follow-up, it's time for me to release the second arrow.

"The ransom is ready. It's two billion yen in cash. There shouldn't be any complaints now, should there?"

3

Two billion yen—it's absolutely got to be a lie.

They've prepared double the already exorbitant demand? As if. They underestimate the business of making money.

But, after the "achievement" of determining my name, the kidnapper's, when they state it so decisively, one can't completely dismiss it.

The negotiation tactic of increasing the ransom has been completely sealed off—it's not like I was underestimating or looking down on them, but I can't deny that I had thought of Mamoru Oyagiri as merely a bodyguard, not a detective nor an assistant, believing that reasoning and investigation were not his field of expertise.

Is it over?

Now that he knows my name, is it game over? What else does he know? My address, my phone number? The location of this ship where I'm keeping Ms. Kyoko confined? No, that can't be... surely, he doesn't know.

If he knew all of that, my hands would already be tied behind my back...

"Please don't misunderstand me, Ms. 'Takako Takanaka'. I just want to make a deal with you... I haven't notified the police yet."

While I was still recovering from my confusion, Mamoru Oyagiri made that offer. He hasn't informed the police?

Is that true?

It's got to be a lie—I can't be sure of it.

But, even if it's true, what's the point of him saying that here? Is it out of kindness to give the flustered criminal a sigh of relief?"

Self-deprecatingly, I thought that might be the case... but maybe that's spot on because, despite my mistake, Mamoru Oyagiri is not a detective. He's not an assistant. He's a bodyguard, and his job is to worry about Ms. Kyoko's safety.

He must absolutely want to avoid pushing the kidnapper too far, leading me to a desperate state where I might harm Ms. Kyoko in a 'if I die, we all die' scenario. He can't afford to not consider the possibility that I could hurt her.

Mamoru Oyagiri isn't aiming to deliver me to justice for judgment—he ultimately doesn't care about me as long as Ms. Kyoko returns unharmed.

There's room for negotiation. There's room for the usual kidnapper's deal.

Even if he has actually reported to the police... I can still manage it now.

Reflection can wait.

Indeed, I've been found out by someone who can't be reset.

It wouldn't be strange for it to be over because of this.

However, I'm not only negotiating with Mamoru Oyagiri... just before that, I was also negotiating with the "hostage," the Forgetful Detective.

No, it's a negotiation.

If she's his boss and employer, and if the chain of command is functioning, then I still have a chance.

"That's good to hear. Because I am not 'Takako Takanaka'."

Belatedly, I denied it. It might be a futile struggle, but it's better than affirming—it would have been a great thing if he had been even slightly upset. It's still too early to give up.

However, I can stop using the arrogant tone of a kidnapper—doing it is almost laughable.

Originally, I am a person who is polite to everyone.

"So you've prepared two billion yen?"

"Please let me confirm Ms. Kyoko's safety."

Ignoring my pointless insistence, Mamoru Oyagiri came out strong—fortunately, I can grant that wish.

I return to the cabin from the deck.

Hopefully, the signal doesn't cut off midway.

4

"Nice to meet you. I am Kyoko Okitegami, the detective."

Hearing such a voice from the other end of the phone, I, without thinking, let out a relieved sigh—to put it mildly. To state it plainly, I collapsed on the spot from my knees.

Ms. Kyoko. She was safe.

No, I haven't confirmed her condition, so it's premature to decide she's safe, but at least from her voice—which, of course, wasn't synthesized—it didn't seem like she had any serious injuries or was undergoing severe prisoner abuse.

It was the usual Ms. Kyoko, infuriatingly nonchalant as ever.

This was evidenced by the following line:

"Who might you be?"

Such a line was enough to sap one's strength. I had racked my brain, tentatively pulling at a thread that seemed ready to snap at any moment, and somehow managed to get through on this call. Yet, from her end, Ms. Kyoko seemed to have completely forgotten who I was—no matter how many times we met, every single morning she greeted me with a "nice to meet you" as if it were our first encounter.

Well, that’s fine. It was to be expected. It's something I feel acutely, day in, day out.

More than that, I still couldn't believe that I had managed to get this call through, and my hand holding the receiver was shaking... to hear Ms. Kyoko's voice so easily.

But it wasn't "easily."

I had thought as much in this one night as I would in a lifetime.

It was a result earned through proper effort—although to call it proper, I had to include some rather rough reasoning, and there was a significant gamble involved, but still, I did everything I could.

Perhaps she had resigned herself to the fact that I had uncovered her identity—"Takako Takanaka"—(though maybe not)? Or maybe it was the declaration that I had prepared two billion yen (a lie), and informed her that I hadn't notified the police (also technically a lie), that was strategically effective—but it seems that there had been moves on her end as well.

Even if I must acknowledge my own effort as effort for the sake of growth, it would be arrogant to think that everything was due to it—no doubt, Ms. Kyoko had, in her own way, come up with an escape plan, and it was through such trial and error in negotiating with the perpetrator that this call had been connected.

"I am Mamoru Oyagiri, twenty-seven years old. I'm the security guard at the Okitegami Detective Agency, and your subordinate."

"I see. So you are my faithful subordinate."

I hadn’t said ‘faithful’.

Such an exchange would be idyllic if we were talking at the office in the morning.

"Um, so, because I was told I'd be killed if I say anything unnecessary, I will just convey the matter at hand. Is that alright?"

"Eh, yes."

"Just to be clear, please don’t take notes or record this call. You would know that, being a staff member of the Okitegami Detective Agency."

It was only after being told this that I realized I should have recorded the call. The voice of the kidnapper, their reaction when their identity was pointed out, and the voice of the missing Ms. Kyoko—with all this evidence, surely even the police, even if they couldn't put together a search team, would have been moved to action.

No matter how cautious I thought I was about the conclusions I had drawn on my own, I must have gotten carried away with excitement—an irredeemable mistake.

"? What's wrong? Did you stop the recording?"

"No, I haven't been recording from the start."

Answering honestly when I knew the perpetrator must be listening nearby was nothing but a symbol of my folly, but:

"That's wonderful. You are the best man."

I was praised by my superior. To be called the best man was praise-worthy indeed—to note, my boss rarely compliments her subordinates.

"Now then, Mr. Oyagiri. May I call you Mr. Mamoru?"

"Yes, some days you do call me that."

"Then, Mr. Mamoru. There is something I'd like you to prepare."

"Is it—the ransom?"

"No, it's clothing."

"Clothing?"

I was taken aback by those unexpected words, or rather, words that seemed out of place—clothing?

A one billion yen ransom was an exorbitant demand, but it was still a matter of money... but, clothing?

"I will spare you the details, but currently, I am in a position where I must think. And when I say position, I mean I'm sitting—oops, my apologies, I won't say any more."

"?"

I didn't quite understand the last part of her line, but it seemed she wasn't speaking to me, but rather to the kidnapper nearby.

Rather than standing, she is sitting.

Such a trivial piece of information leaked, it seems like it wouldn't be of any consequence... Or perhaps, is she being made to sit in such a distinctive chair? Could the shape of the chair suggest the location of her confinement?

...That's unlikely.

Overthinking isn't good.

"Anyway, since I need to deduce from now on, could you prepare the clothes necessary for that? If you are a staff member under my command, you naturally have access to my closet, don't you?"

Access to the closet? Was I ever given such grand authority... I was told not to creep into the bedroom, but. Generally speaking, I hadn't been aware that Ms. Kyoko needed particular "clothes" to unleash her detective skills.

Is that why Ms. Kyoko never wears the same outfit twice?

I can't afford to carelessly agree or respond since the perpetrator is probably listening in (they must have put it on speakerphone... since Ms. Kyoko could take over the call so quickly, it's obvious, but this isn't a payphone call. I hear no sound of coins).

Despite everything said, I'm completely in the dark about the situation over there—it might not be Ms. Kyoko who wants the "clothes," but the culprit instead. Perhaps what's targeted isn't Ms. Kyoko's accumulated pool of funds but her voluminous closet... How ridiculous that would be.

"I'm not your mail-order website," would be a witty retort that springs to mind, one that's quite sharp for me, but I'll hold back.

"What kind of 'clothes' should I prepare? If I am allowed to select them based on my aesthetics..."

"Please don't do that."

Why dismiss my taste outright? We've only just met.

"A turquoise blue turtleneck in a summer knit, orchid chino pants, and for the outerwear, a casual long parka in a lime-green color, no socks needed, and I'll leave the color of the shoes to you, so prepare a pair of loafers, please."

Say "please" all you want... Well, Ms. Kyoko may have forgotten, but her ordering me to fetch clothes isn't exactly the first time, so I'm not entirely bewildered by the request.

I had forcefully convinced myself that it was part of my duties to be familiar with the clothes of the targets I was protecting, but I never thought that my role as errand boy would be this helpful.

Though strictly speaking, it's not helpful.

The "order" given by Ms. Kyoko was almost incomprehensible to me this time—as if she had rattled off a list of computer jargon.

At the very least, when she had me run errands before, she used to explain in simple terms, even an amateur in ladies' fashion could understand. Why on earth, of all times, was it now...

To be more honest, I didn't even understand the colors. Turquoise blue? Does it look like an octopus? I've heard octopus blood is blue... or was it crayfish?

Even though I had worked at an art museum, I wasn't an art major—I only understand as far as indigo.

Perhaps my hesitation communicated itself without words,

"If you're unsure, please look at a color sample. I believe it's somewhere around."

That was Ms. Kyoko's advice—I would have preferred her to tell me the shape rather than the color, but unfortunately, that's where our conversation ended.

A synthetic voice returned, asking, "Did you understand?"

"In three hours, at the Okitegami Building where you are now, I will come to pick them up directly. Please have the 'clothes' that Ms. Kyoko mentioned ready by then—you won't need money, just for reference."

5

The situation has dramatically progressed, or so it seems, yet it has become a considerable predicament—an outrageous one.

Being told to assemble a full set of "clothes" might seem at first glance a task of lesser difficulty compared to the challenge of preparing one billion yen, but for me, it was an indescribably unreasonable request.

I was instructed not to record it, yet the unfamiliar words commanded by Ms. Kyoko are fading from my mind—a sensation different from the detective's reset due to forgetfulness, a gradual disappearance that's unsettling.

How ephemeral and unreliable are these unfamiliar words—I must act quickly before I completely forget them.

The new time limit is three hours.

Within three hours, I have to prepare an outfit for the famed detective—hmm, is it more like a battle suit than formal wear?

She mentioned something about having access to her closet... but if Ms. Kyoko has had her memory reset even once, she shouldn't be able to grasp what clothes she currently owns.

Or could it be that Ms. Kyoko's closet encompasses all attire from all ages and nations?

If that's the case, I'd rather not delve into such profound depths... Too many choices can lead to decision paralysis. Perhaps it would be wiser to head to a clothing store quietly and seek advice from the sales staff in the women's clothing department—should I do that?

Ah, no good. The idea is fine, but the timing is off. Such shops open at ten in the morning at the earliest, usually at eleven—and the current time is seven.

Just waiting for the shop to open would bring the time limit upon me.

Seek help from Officer Hidarui?—What good would that do. Just because he can obtain the owner of a car from its license plate doesn't mean he knows anything about women's clothing. I can hardly imagine that rogue officer is more knowledgeable about women's fashion than I am.

So then, who can I ask for help with women's clothing—logically, someone familiar with women's clothing would be a woman.

As a gentleman who dresses accordingly, I take a modest pride in my very modest relations with women—to the point that the only lady I could think to ask for help in such a situation would be my mother. And while that doesn't shake my respect for her in the slightest, she's not fashionable enough to be proud of... It's simply a matter of being from different generations.

In the end, it seems I must manage on my own. Again.

Swearing to the heavens that I'll demand a raise when Ms. Kyoko returns, I took the detective's advice and started my search for this so-called color sample.

[redacted]

第七話　紫の解決編

[redacted]

Ch 7: The Violet Resolution Part

1

By now, I wonder if the security guard, Mamoru Oyagiri, is scurrying around inside Ms. Kyoko's walk-in closet looking for the "clothes" that she had mentioned? My sympathies are with him, but, unfortunately, his troubles are bound to go unrewarded... because, as of ten o'clock this morning, I won't be headed towards Okitegami Building.

It's not that I'm late. I just have no intention of going.

He has no choice but to be stood up, after being jerked around by a tyrannical boss. I'm sorry, but I have no intention of ever contacting him again—it's too dangerous.

To be honest, when Ms. Kyoko expressed her desire for a costume, I almost acquiesced, thinking, "Well, maybe that's just the way it is"... Each master detective has their own style.

It's like what athletes refer to as... what was it? A routine? I'm not well-versed in it, but didn't Kosuke Kindaichi stand on his head when he deduced? I'm uncertain if that's according to the novels or an original movie device... Sherlock Holmes's deerstalker cap was apparently the creation of an illustrator... Anyway, I almost believed that selecting her own clothes was an important, superstitious procedure for the detective known for forgetting.

But I quickly reconsidered—sure, everyone has their ups and downs, whether athletes or famous detectives, but it should hardly affect the big picture.

A matter of mood is just that, a matter of mood.

It might affect the time to the goal, but it shouldn't make the possible impossible... I don't really need Ms. Kyoko to be the fastest detective. So, what exactly is she plotting?

Why does she insist on choosing her own clothes, so vehemently rejecting my coordination?

Is it some sort of time-buying tactic, similar to when I demanded one billion yen from Mamoru Oyagiri... is she waiting for help to arrive while she takes her sweet time changing clothes? But when I heard the words, "So, please ask this Mr. Oyagiri to bring my clothes," it clicked.

I see, that's how it is.

By substituting the astronomical sum of one billion yen with the more tangible "clothes," she's trying to create a connection between me, the kidnapper, and the security guard, Mamoru Oyagiri—essentially, the perfect moment for the profit-motivated kidnapping to fail.

She's intent on making the exchange happen.

Since what I want isn't the ransom, such a moment of exchange should never arrive, and yet, to obtain what I desire—the confidential information of a difficult case—that best timing becomes unavoidable.

Rather than feeling triumphant for seeing through the great detective's trick, I'm more astounded—smiling all the while, what a nasty piece of work she is.

She keeps pulling out methods I detest one after another... perhaps she's more suited to be a criminal than I am?

Therefore, I decided it's better not to respond hastily—I pretended to fall for the trap and made a threatening call to Oyagiri, allowing the detective and her bodyguard to speak over speakerphone.

I didn't want to be too violent, but I had to threaten her with a knife to ensure she wouldn't speak of my appearance or the fact that we were on a ship—I wasn't particularly intimidating, but Ms. Kyoko seemed to get the message, and for the most part, only talked about the "clothes" she wanted brought to her.

Well, without Ms. Kyoko having to say it, he had already grasped the identity of the kidnapper...

I had anticipated that she would say something more along the lines of seeking help, within a safe range to not provoke me, but it didn't seem to be the case—Ms. Kyoko was talking lively enough for someone tied to a chair and with a knife pointed at her as well as a mobile phone, but from what I could see on the side, she didn't seem to trust her subordinate all that much.

Certainly, it's only natural.

Even if last night's reset was a feigned sleep, the previous reset when she got kidnapped was undoubtedly real—she had said "Nice to meet you" like they were speaking for the first time.

In other words, Ms. Kyoko is uncertain whether she can trust "Mamoru Oyagiri"—she's even scrutinizing whether "Mamoru Oyagiri" truly exists. Hence, during the call, far from being open, she was probing the other party—well, indeed, if I had an accomplice, that tactic might have been available to me.

Friends are truly important, after all.

On the flip side, it means I couldn't take advantage of that relationship—had I only been clear on why Ms. Kyoko hired Oyagiri, I thought I might have been able to use him to my advantage, but alas, it was a fleeting hope.

However, just being able to hear the content of the "errand" from Ms. Kyoko to him was enough.

"A turquoise blue turtleneck in a summer knit, orchid chino pants, and for the outerwear, a casual long parka in a lime-green color, no socks needed, and I'll leave the color of the shoes to you, so prepare a pair of loafers, please."

Oyagiri, who wasn't allowed to take notes, is likely struggling with this by now—I can easily imagine, considering his reaction during the call, that he is certainly not well-versed in women's clothing.

I may only have a 67-point fashion sense, but I am confident that I am more knowledgeable about women's clothing than men, unless their occupation is a stylist. In short, there's no need for him to go out of his way to prepare it because when the apparel shops open at ten, I can assemble Ms. Kyoko's costume with my own hands.

I'm aware of the clothing sizes beforehand—as long as the tags are cut, there should be no problem with them being new.

Ms. Kyoko, who never wears the same clothes twice, would have all her outfits looking virtually new... “Different from the clothes in my closet” isn't a concern since she doesn't remember what's in her closet... Even if she had marked them, she would have forgotten about those marks.

If I hand over the desired set of clothes I purchased from the shop, saying “These are the clothes entrusted to me by Mamoru Oyagiri,” even the audacious Ms. Kyoko would be speechless—it would mean that the excuse for delaying the deduction is gone, and at the same time, it's synonymous with her losing any hope for rescue. The security guard, and even the police he might have relied on, will give up if they know they couldn't capture me at the moment of the exchange (if they misunderstand).

If exhaustive deduction is a reasoning pursuit of all possibilities at high speed, then all I need to do is seal off all those possibilities—except for the path I wish for. If I'm to bind Ms. Kyoko, it should not be to an armchair but to a single path.

2

Having smoothly finished shopping, I returned to the almost deserted harbor where I had moored the rubber boat—a remnant that might be more aptly described as a pier—and what I saw across the sea was a large number of Japan Coast Guard patrol boats heading offshore.

I'll admit I overstated a bit. It didn't go "smoothly." I must begrudgingly admit that I probably struggled as much as him—partly because I couldn't gather all the outfits from the same store,

as that might have led to my being tracked. Time naturally passes as you ride escalators up and down the numerous apparel shops in the shopping mall. It's only fair to confess that I was in the care of professional customer service as well.

But the real reason it took so much time—the true reason I couldn't be the fastest errand runner—was because as I continued shopping, the doubt "Is this really okay?" crossed my mind and lingered like an afterimage.

Despite following the recipe for the items, I couldn't believe that combining these costumes would result in such a high-fashion coordinate. You might wonder what someone with a 67-point sense of style is even saying, but there was nothing I could do if I felt that way even a 67-point sense of style. You can't control your sensibility.

I thought at first that the designs of the top brands were clashing with each other, but that wasn't quite it. Rather, the color schemes of the individual parts just didn't seem to match at all.

Unlike the pitiful security guard who wasn't allowed to take notes, I had properly recorded the call between Ms. Kyoko and Mamoru Oyagiri. So there shouldn't be any mistakes—though I checked repeatedly just to be sure.

There was no mistake.

So, was it a slip of the tongue by Ms. Kyoko?

...However, when I half-doubtingly tried on the thong sandals, I had an experience where the shoes shone with an unbelievable brilliance at Ms. Kyoko's feet.

The opinion of an amateur shouldn't be entertained.

If I get too creative, the costume I brought back will be revealed to not be the one I received from Oyagiri, but one that I had purchased... Ms. Kyoko already knows about my lack of sense.

So, with hesitation, I trusted the prices of the high-class brands and returned to the harbor—so to say it went "smoothly" would be a lie.

And the "large number of Japan Coast Guard patrol boats heading out to sea" was also a lie—it was an exaggeration to say "large"; there were actually about five.

But this wasn't me trying to put on airs. It really looked like such a desperate scene—even though I was outside of that circle, it still felt as if I had been completely surrounded.

It was as if a scene whispered in my ear, telling me to give up on futile resistance.

"Keeping someone confined at sea is a pretty good idea, I must say, but on the flip side, it's like you're trapped as well—there's hardly any escape," I had thought.

As one who gazes into the abyss is gazed upon by the abyss, I crouched in the shadows near the seawall, straining to see if I could glimpse my ship—the place of confinement—, and that's when I was approached by someone who was watching me from the shadows of the tetrapods.

No, wasn't not something as cool as the abyss.

It was just a master detective calling out from behind to the criminal, probably turning purple in the face, who had been standing dumbfounded—it was the white-haired forgetful detective.

Wearing the 67-point costume, the forgetful detective had landed ashore for the first time in a whole day.

"Well, it's good that I was rescued by chance while you were away. I'm not good with chaotic situations," Ms. Kyoko said with a smile... but was it really by chance? Was Ms. Kyoko rescued while I was being held up shopping...?

The patrol boats?

Did Ms. Kyoko call for them while I was away...? Did she untie her bounds herself and make contact? No, I was carrying my mobile phone, and there were no communication devices originally aboard the ship. Even if she went on deck, at most she could've cried out to a passing ship for help... So in the end, did I lose to chance?

I don't want to believe it. I don't want to think that—then it would be more logical to think that during that call, Ms. Kyoko signaled her location to Oyagiri using some sort of code, and he reported it to the police.

But this logic raises new questions.

I am not so laid-back that I would not be wary of them having a conversation in code. I am not an expert in code-breaking, but I have confirmed that there is no such relationship between Ms. Kyoko and Oyagiri—they are "strangers" every morning.

So, there is no such thing as a code that only works between them... even if there were, it would reset every time she sleeps. The demand to "please bring clothes" meaning "I am confined on a ship" is such a complex code that it couldn't possibly be made up on the fly—if it could be, I would be able to understand it since I was listening right by her side.

First of all, the sea is vast. Even if you say you are confined on a ship, that alone only narrows down the search by excluding thirty percent of the Earth's surface area that is land.

It's impossible for Ms. Kyoko, who is being confined, to know where she is...

"The idea of an armchair to mask the rocking of the ship was pretty good too, but if you are surrounded by the sea and can't escape anyway, you might as well leave the engine running and not worry about the noise. Not making use of the advantage of a 'moving confinement' is a big minus for a kidnapper."

When pointed out, it's an oversight that I can only agree upon—but at that moment on the high seas, I had already shifted my thinking to hiding the fact from Ms. Kyoko.

However, I don't think that was a fatal mistake. Isn't there also a risk in moving an unknown confinement location needlessly? It's not a bad idea at all to just keep it anchored in a safe area...

"No, no, precisely because it's a ship, you can determine its current location. After all, it's a technique originally used by sailors and pirates—determining coordinates from the stars."

...Was it when she kicked me and leaped onto the deck?

Looking up at the sky from the bow, she wasn't despairing over the lack of escape routes; she was simply checking the positions of the stars. The way she opened her hands and stretched out her arms wasn't a defensive posture, but rather using her body as a makeshift surveying instrument... The moment she realized it was a ship, she switched to such calculations—what a quick turnaround—the fastest detective.

Indeed, the movements of celestial bodies with their eternal history do not reset in just a day or so... That's how Ms. Kyoko understood her current location. It was because it wasn't raining that night. When asked about it, it's a perfectly legitimate, albeit unsurprising and ordinary method—just incredibly speedy.

But how she conveyed that to Oyagiri remains a mystery—will the mystery stay a mystery?

"...So, why are you here, Ms. Kyoko? If you got rescued, shouldn't you be under police protection and undergoing questioning by now?"

While trying to maintain composure, I turned towards her—staring at the sea with lingering attachment doesn't help.

If I have to abandon my plan to minimize expenses by reselling the yacht, as it would have been seized as a huge piece of evidence... why has Ms. Kyoko appeared here, not with a police escort, but on her own? No, if we go that far, there's no reason for her to appear at all.

"That's the thing, though I hesitate to mention, according to my memo, I seem to be a master detective. I thought I'd let myself do some mystery-solving."

"Mystery... solving?"

"Yes. Normally, you solve mysteries for clients, not for criminals, but I wanted to give you special treatment. After all, you are someone I once recognized as an enemy."

Now, you are no longer my enemy.

That's how it felt to be written off—a strangely similar feeling to having a weight lifted off my shoulders.

That's right, speaking of weights on one's shoulders...

"Ms. Kyoko, um, this—the costume you mentioned."

I held out the shopping bag. Each item is wrapped carefully from different stores, so the bag is somewhat bulky.

Certainly, the fact that Ms. Kyoko is disembarking from the ship in such a manner proves that, regardless of the nature of the so-called mystery-solving, the claim that the reasoning required a costume was a complete falsehood. Conversely, these shopping bags, from the beginning, were unnecessary for her, but at this point, I might as well let go of them, along with her criminal plans, to feel relieved.

"Oh dear, how polite, thank you for your consideration."

Despite the possibility of a bomb, Ms. Kyoko easily accepted it and proceeded to check the contents of the bag.

After carefully examining them,

"Then, I shall use these items as lounge wear," Ms. Kyoko declared.

It's me who should say thank you for your consideration, for this painful, fresh wound.

3

I, having received a request from my superior for "clothing," and not even having a clue as to the silhouette, let alone the color, started by searching for the color sample book I was told about. Surprisingly, it was found in an unexpected place.

Inside the computer. The laptop, which had been extensively used for internet searches, contained it not in the vast web of knowledge, but in the hard drive—under the folder named "Color Sample."

It was straightforward and exceedingly easy to understand.

Upon opening it, each file was meticulously named, and clicking on the desired color name opened a very color sample-like elongated image, allowing one to visually recognize the color. There were over a thousand files saved in the folder, and I was overwhelmed by the sheer number (theoretically, there are an infinite number of colors, right...?), but I searched for the exact colors Ms. Kyoko had specified.

Turquoise blue. Orchid. Lime-green.

Somehow, each color seemed more flamboyant than I had anticipated. At this point, I was somewhat perplexed, but actually, following the color samples and crawling into Ms. Kyoko's walk-in closet—or rather, her costume room—pulling out the clothes of the shapes I was told (it felt like bringing things out of storage. Once I realized they were sorted with the same logic as a library, finding the right clothes wasn't so difficult), my anxiety took on a definite shape.

Hmm? Isn't this unfashionable?

Each piece on its own wasn't bad... or rather, could be seen as elegant (I have no sense—or qualifications—to compliment women's clothing), but when combined, each seemed to negate the good qualities of the others.

She said she couldn't perform without her "battle clothes," like some magical girl, but I have never seen Ms. Kyoko put together such a mismatched coordinate.

Certainly, Ms. Kyoko is so fashionable that no one has seen her wear the same clothes twice, but there is a certain tendency—something like "effortlessness" is what she usually embodies.

Did I make the wrong selection from the costume room, or did I misunderstand the instructions from my superior beforehand?

The latter seems more likely—as memories fade, and on top of that, I'm post-all-nighter and still tense. To be frank, I am quite sleepy right now.

Should I have taken a nap somewhere?

The ten o'clock deadline is approaching minute by minute—if connecting with the culprit is supposed to present a chance, it seems unlikely that I will be able to make the most of this opportunity as things stand.

Let's try again. My intuition is telling me this is wrong. It's not the intuition of a security guard, but that of a live-in employee—I cannot overlook such a coordinate as someone who sees Ms. Kyoko off every morning.

Frankly, if Ms. Kyoko were to try to leave in this outfit, I would stop her with my body if I had to. Even if she calls me a pest, I will definitely stop her.

Laid out on the table and evaluated from a distance, I don't think the silhouette is bad, so maybe I got the color wrong?

It could be worse than ladies' product names, all unfamiliar colors... maybe I should review the folder "Color Sample" again.

Even if I'm not allowed to take notes, if I keep looking at the file names—if I cover them all, it might stimulate my hippocampus, which is nearing its limit.

It didn't happen as expected. However, as I continued to look, I realized that the files were not computer-generated, but rather photos of actual fabric taken in the three-dimensional world.

Well, even with the same color, depending on the base fabric, the appearance changes, so maybe it should be this way, but I get goosebumps thinking about how difficult it must have been to create such a handmade-feeling color sample—a fabric sample.

I was impressed by something completely unrelated, wondering if Ms. Kyoko's fashion ability is maintained backed by this level of commitment-no, my thoughts can't maintain direction. I keep choosing the passive and comfortable pattern of being impressed and touched... it doesn't mean that I have to have a critical spirit, but I have to be able to blame my boss for knocking me into this kind of chaos, or I will no longer be able to maintain my consciousness.

Honestly, I've nearly dozed off in front of the computer several times, saying, "Whoops!" They say that looking at a display's light before bed can prevent deep sleep, but the opposite is true for me; looking at this kind of screen makes me sleepy. It's probably not the electric light but because my consciousness becomes diffused—yet I've been glued to the display since last night.

Should I just print it out? The printer isn't immediately visible, which is very much in the style of the Okitegami Detective Agency, but like the phone or fax machine, it's necessary for business, so it must be around somewhere—after all, these color samples could have been originally bound into a book. It would be far better than booting up a computer every time...

Why are the color samples stored on the computer, and why, when selecting clothes, does it seem reasonable to create them by photographing the fabric?

A photograph, being two-dimensional, can't convey the feel or comfort of fabric... and even the appearance is different, honestly, the photos aren't even that high resolution. Color sample books can only ever be a reference... there's no need to be exact, and in fact, making them from actual clothing fabric might deviate from their original role.

Even my sleepy brain understands such things, so it should be obvious to Ms. Kyoko... the reason why the color samples weren't printed out, the reason why the images were made from photographs.

Damn it. The elongated photos that look so much like color samples...

If I had realized it just an hour earlier.

Then I could have slept an hour earlier.

I wouldn't have had to walk in the walk-in closet... but still, realizing it is pretty good for me.

In this folder saved inside the computer.

The color samples, the fabric samples—are photos taken with a mobile phone. The elongated rectangles, the rectangular shape, it's not to make it look like color samples, but it's the shape of the display. Nowadays, there's something called square photography, but—the shape is just the entrance to the realization.

What's important is that if these fabric photos were taken with a mobile phone, there's information contained in the data besides the image itself—considering today's privacy issues where one can collect excessive old car sighting information without leaving the room, it's generally recommended to turn that function off—location information.

The photos may contain location information—no, they definitely, unquestionably do.

If it’s Ms. Kyoko.

That’s why the color samples are saved on the computer... um, how do you display the photos on a map?

An Internet search.

While I vow not to spout the nonsense that knowledge dependent on the net is useless in the real world, as I've heard it said, I summon the power of collective intelligence and call up a map on the sleep-inducing display, which is as good as it gets.

Of course, I thought a map of Japan would suffice—rather, I thought a map of a single prefecture would do.

But what needed to be activated was, astonishingly, the world map... The over one thousand fabric photos saved in Ms. Kyoko's handmade color sample book were scattered across the globe.

It was like a mosaic art piece, the photos gathered to form the shape of the world map... "To create this must have been incredibly difficult" is an understatement. It's a color sample that seems impossible without traveling the world, including conflict zones... In a way, it's the ultimate commemorative photo collection.

This is no time to be mesmerized.

By this point, I understand what Ms. Kyoko wanted to convey to me over that phone call—subtly, yet definitely emphasizing to look at the color sample when selecting clothes, because she was trying to inform me of her current location through the requested colors.

Even while threatened by a kidnapper, the nonchalant detective was sending a beacon... Of course, a question arises.

A question, or rather, an unnatural contradiction.

But that can wait—no, I don't even want to think about it. I'll ask Ms. Kyoko directly once she's safely back. It's impossible for me, especially after an all-nighter, to consider all the contradictions. At best, I can think of only one more—if each fabric photo indicates a location, why did Ms. Kyoko specify three different colors?

It's not hard to imagine that the kidnapper is keeping Ms. Kyoko's location a secret—so even the forgetful detective could not pinpoint the exact location and had to relay three possibilities? Like three license plates?

But after checking the location information of each of the specified fabric photos, I realized that was not the case—it was far too dispersed.

One was in a city on the North American continent, one in a city on the Eurasian continent, and one in a city on the Oceanian continent... No matter how uncertain, it's impossible for the candidates to be so scattered. The climate conditions are too different. Even I could tell the difference between those three cities with my eyes closed in an air-conditioned room... or if the room was air-conditioned, I wouldn't be able to?

Still, even setting that aside, it's hard to believe that Ms. Kyoko is being held overseas... If she was kidnapped by such a global criminal organization, I'd be helpless. I wouldn't have a clue.

I thought I could contact Officer Hidarui with confidence once Ms. Kyoko's location was discovered... But in the end, am I to bet on a one-in-three chance again? When it doesn't seem like the correct answer would be within a simple mathematical one-third?

Just like when I narrowed down the sightings of the classic car, I wanted to reduce the amount of information even a little, so I turned off the display of most of the thousand-plus photos shown on the world map, leaving only the three specified fabric photos. Without any premonition of what it might do... and indeed, it did nothing.

It was blatantly obvious from the start.

This was also simple mathematics—however, not one-third, but three points.

The definition of a triangle. A shape formed by connecting three points that are not on the same line—they need to be separate.

Connect the three points with lines to make three sides.

The point in North America, the point in Eurasia, and the point in Oceania, when connected, formed a beautiful equilateral triangle. Well, it's not strictly an equilateral triangle, there must be some error... After all, the Earth is round, and it's impossible to draw a perfectly accurate equilateral triangle on its surface... Whether it becomes an equilateral triangle or not also depends on the type of map used... However, it's no coincidence that an equilateral triangle (or something resembling it) appeared on the commonly seen world map in Japan, not just any triangle.

And if I rely on my faint memories from school days, the characteristic of an equilateral triangle is... Yes, its centroid, circumcenter, and incenter coincide.

But if that coinciding point is Ms. Kyoko's current location, why didn't she simply give me the location information for that point—if it was indicated by one color for one point, such a completely mismatched coordination wouldn't have been necessary.

Did she intentionally disrupt that coordination to make me review the color samples...? No, Ms. Kyoko is a detective, not a deity. She might be a deity of preserving wealth... but she's not capable of manipulating people so conveniently.

No, it's not that—despite the regret of the color mismatch, she had no choice but to indicate three points in order to suggest one.

Because she is confined at sea.

No matter how much she travels the world, it's not possible to get detailed location information at sea—the exact center of the equilateral triangle indicated by the three colors was barely within Japan's territorial waters in the Pacific Ocean.

That means—I've got it!

Ms. Kyoko is being confined in a submarine!

[redacted]

終章　白の帰宅

[redacted]

Final Ch: The White Returning Home

It was not a submarine but a ship; however, thanks to the swift actions of Officer Hidarui, who had received my report, Ms. Kyoko was rescued at the anticipated location—while it couldn't be said that she escaped by her own strength, the fact that the forgetful detective had carved out her own escape route prevented this incident from becoming a farcical episode of a famous detective being kidnapped by criminals.

The confidential information, worth over one billion yen, that the perpetrator sought did not leak out, and the case was resolved, hence upholding the reputation of absolute confidentiality.

However, the kidnapper—"Takako Takanaka"—had left the ship at the time of the rescue and has since been missing. Regarding this, it's not something to be openly discussed, but I suspect that Ms. Kyoko might have deliberately let her escape.

It's not unusual. Ms. Kyoko, a professional detective, sometimes lets criminals go, especially if she herself is the victim.

It's not a matter of a generous approach based on the spirit of forgiveness.

It's simply her style as a slave to money—she doesn't capture criminals that don't bring in money, she doesn't resolve cases for free—it's like letting them go in anticipation that they will reappear before her one day as a "paying criminal."

With that said,

"I'm home, Mr. Mamoru! I missed you!"

"No, stop that. We are not in that kind of relationship."

Upon returning to the Okitegami Building, I somehow managed to peel off Ms. Kyoko who had hugged me around the shoulders to greet me.

"Oh, what a shame. My bodyguard is so cold. I wonder if he's made of iron."

She pouted her lips as if to sulk, but let's interpret it as a tough joke to a subordinate who was worried about her—believing in her steely control, as someone who had concluded that the driver of the old car was a woman and not a man, I can't afford to be hugged so easily. It would shake the foundation of my deductive reasoning.

And above all, I am too sleepy right now to share a moving reunion. According to what I've heard, Ms. Kyoko has been awake for almost as long as I have, and though she seems lively and spirited—perhaps it's a high from staying up all night?

Either way, now that I have confirmed Ms. Kyoko's safe return as her bodyguard, I think I'll go to sleep a bit early.

Oh, but before that.

I need to resolve a lingering contradiction—I'll need to completely redo the security plan from the ground up.

"Ms. Kyoko, may I ask you something?"

"Go ahead, as long as it's not about bonus evaluations."

How could she nail it like that? She didn't think she was going to hug it out and make it go away, did she?

"About the coordinates indicated with that color sample—"

"Yes. I'm glad you noticed."

"I regret noticing it so late. But how did you remember that you had color samples saved on the laptop?"

Ms. Kyoko was lured into an old car and drugged—or perhaps some kind of sleeping gas was used, the means are unclear as they had been reset.

But if that part is unclear, then the memory before that—the "minimum necessary memory" she would have acquired from her computer or smartphone before leaving the house in the morning—should have been reset as well. Even the cipher hidden in the color samples should have been forgotten—this is something I haven't even discussed with my collaborator, Officer Hidarui.

If there's something in Ms. Kyoko's memory that "does not reset," then that would pertain to the very identity of the forgetful detective—remembering not only the existence of the color samples and the code table but also the arrangement of over a thousand colors. This would challenge the very concept of what it means to be a forgetful detective. We managed to get through this time, but if rogues appear with the same goal of extracting confidential information from the forgetful detective, the excuse that "I've forgotten" won't hold up.

"Indeed. It would be problematic if that point was discerned, so to the kidnapper, I spun a puzzle and told an appropriate lie. Something about you having telepathic abilities or some such."

She's fairly good at telling lies.

Perhaps, in reality, she was even more cunning in her deception... However, if such an exchange had taken place, then my hypothesis—that Ms. Kyoko deliberately let the criminal escape—seems to have a certain persuasive power.

Kyoko chuckled softly and continued, "But, of course, I must tell the truth to you, Mr. Mamoru."

"After all the trouble you've gone to rescue me, and yet you don't even ask for a raise, such a wonderful security guard you are."

I would definitely demand a raise.

I stand to fight for the rights of the worker... But what is the truth, anyway?

"There's no "truth" worth making a big deal of. I came up with the color sample cipher when I was a teenager."

"Y-You thought of this as a teenager?"

I had heard a theory that Ms. Kyoko's forgetful nature wasn't innate; her memory resets only go back seven or eight years. That means the cipher she planned before then wouldn't be affected even if a day or two's memories were reset—because her memory is wiped every time she sleeps, it seemed that Kyoko Okitegami had always exhibited extraordinary talent as the Forgetful Detective, but it appears she had been demonstrating her unusual skills even before then.

"Well, it's me we're talking about, after all. I thought I'd probably implemented that idea somewhere for a time like this and saved it somewhere—if not, I'd just have to come up with another plan."

Her escape plans were all-encompassing.

In reality, how much Ms. Kyoko was counting on me, someone she "had never met," was an unknown factor—I was self-conceitedly proud of my all-out deduction miraculously coming to fruition, but from her perspective, it may have just been the sensation of one of her many last-resort escape plans working out.

Ordinarily, those last resorts wouldn't be possible.

"Are you satisfied now?"

"Ah... yes, I am convinced. I'm not really, but I'll say I am."

"That's good to hear. Phew. By the way, did anything unusual happen while I was away?"

"...No, nothing in particular."

"That's also good to hear. Now, I would like to take a shower and go to bed—I don't want to forget about your achievements, Mr. Mamoru, but I can't win against sleepiness."

"Yes—I'll also take some rest."

In a two-hundred-million-yen bed.

I thought I could sleep peacefully now that the nagging contradiction had been resolved, but while trying to fall asleep, I encountered a new source of anxiety—the cipher created by the teenage Kyoko.

Yet, photos taken with a mobile phone contain more than just location data... They record the date and time of the photograph, a veritable treasure trove of information. The past of the Forgetful Detective is shrouded in mystery, but if one were to analyze those thousand-plus images to pinpoint when and where she was active—the exact date, time, and location—then the big data might just unravel the enigma surrounding her.

In this information society, even someone with my modest skills could stumble upon the identity of a kidnapper—it's better to eliminate any risks.

I don't know how to alter the location data in the images, but I can certainly change the dates. I'll get on it as soon as I wake up—that's what I thought as I fell asleep, but I was not the fastest security guard.

The next morning, when I booted up the office laptop, the folder named "Color Sample" had been completely erased, with no option for restoration—it wasn't just a matter of changing dates in a petty way, but a bold deletion of its very existence.

By someone's hand.

No, there's no need to speculate on who that someone is. It has to be the cryptically mysterious detective.

Incidentally, the attache case under the bed and the waterproof paper inside the shower hose were also gone... If she cleaned up the shower hose when she took a shower, how on earth did she tidy up under my bed?

Despite having been kidnapped and finally returning home, she didn't rest but instead took care of the aftermath for the "next day"—indeed, the fastest detective is quick to act. She doesn't leisurely think about doing it "when she wakes up tomorrow"—for Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

All of these are one-time reminders—sample colors of a cipher table that, now that I know them, can never be used again.

Good grief, I'm flattered when she trusts me like this.

Of course, Ms. Kyoko will also forget that she prepared and then erased the cipher, and the next time she is kidnapped, any attempt to use the same method for escape will end in failure. Knowing such risks, Ms. Kyoko chose to delete data connected to her past... she chose to remain the Forgetful Detective. She chose to continue safeguarding her secrets—opting for secrecy over self-preservation.

Very well, there won't be a next time anyway.

It's just me who will protect Ms. Kyoko from now on.

Afterword

As implied by Mamoru Oyagiri within the story, the rainbow, commonly described as having seven colors, is not strictly seven-colored but rather possesses an infinite spectrum. Depending on the region or cultural sphere, it might be said to have five, six, eight, or even nine colors. The way things appear varies from person to person, but indeed, when you actually look at a rainbow, you might only be able to recognize it as "it's seven colors because it's said to be seven colors" It's like a passive agreement, isn't it? Whether you say "it's seven colors because it's said to be seven colors" or "it's said to be seven colors, so it's seven colors," it's not as if it doesn't look seven-colored enough to warrant a rebuttal. If you think contrarily, the number "seven" might have taken root in the definition because it's a nice round number that resonates with the idea of a lucky seven. It's also said that the maximum number of numbers humans can recognize instantaneously is about seven, so perhaps the "rainbow is seven colors" theory settled on an easy-to-understand conclusion? There could be as many theories as the seven, but this is not a discussion limited to rainbows and colors. In this world, many things are simplified by categorizing them into "easy-to-understand definitions" or "comprehensible classifications," often trimming down the minute differences. For example, blood types are classified into A, B, AB, and O, but in reality, there are more detailed classifications. Or the twelve zodiac signs—though it's slightly different—actually include a thirteenth, Ophiuchus. It's somewhat along those lines. Even when you say "Master Detective!," there are considerable differences among the images of master detectives depicted in various mysteries, and it's actually difficult to speak of them as if they were the same, yet if we get too detailed, it might be seen as nitpicking, so we gloss over it as "also a Master Detective." Similarly, we talk about the four emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, but can human emotions really be divided into just four types? Indeed, it might even be too many classifications, as some think there are only two types of emotions: pleasure and discomfort. It's like saying, "The rainbow isn't seven colors; it's rainbow-colored."

Thus, the latest installment in the Forgetful Detective series is a kidnapping story. Since it's the detective who is kidnapped, it might not strictly be a kidnapping genre, but it was a joy to write, as it's been a while since Mamoru Oyagiri narrated a full-length story. For more details about their relationship (a master-servant relationship?), the short stories provide more information, which I deduce might someday be compiled into a volume titled "The Ticket of Kyoko Okitegami." With characters like Yakusuke Kakushidate and the Officer looking on, I believe I've been able to deliver a different flavor of Ms. Kyoko. And that's what "The Color Sample of Kyoko Okitegami" was all about.

The variations of Kyoko on the covers drawn by Mr. VOFAN are as endless as the colors themselves. Thank you very much. The next work will be "The Musical Score of Kyoko Okitegami," and I hope you look forward to it.

Nisio Isin

*TL Notes:
-There's no Kyoko book with a musical theme released just yet. "The Ticket of Kyoko Okitegami" is in fact the next book
-The original sequence of colors for the chapters is "red-orange-yellow-aqua-blue-indigo-purple", a classic japanese sequence that doesn't include "green" due to the weird relationship they've always had with the color. A couple colors were changed here for a more "classical rainbow" feel, as the colors themselves don't seem to have anything to do with the chapters